



SHANNON ARCHER

CAROLINE
and the
COLONEL

Book One in the FIRST to MARRY series

A Pride & Prejudice Variation

Caroline and the Colonel

Shannon McLaughlin

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Part I

Prologue

The Peninsular Wars

Cerro del Puerco, Spain
5 March, 1811

* * *

A forceful shiver roused him from his insensibility.

Pain.

Everything hurt. He was also aware of feeling cold though the sun shone brightly above him; he had to move. Quickly. He stared up into clear blue sky, then closed his eyes against the light. He stretched his strong frame, and retracted as when he felt a sharp flash burn up his arm like a blacksmith was pounding a red hot iron rod through his shoulder. He squeezed his eyes shut and swallowed back the bile that filled his throat.

His ears buzzed and his mouth felt too dry to speak, if indeed he felt he could draw enough breath into his lungs to force a word through dust-covered lips. He tried again, slowly and more carefully starting with his toes, and was pleased to find that both his legs moved as he willed them, but when he attempted to lift his left arm, the blinding pain returned and stole his breath. After a wave of sickness passed he slowly turned his head and opened his eyes to examine the injured limb.

Blood.

He let his head fall back and closed his eyes, breathing sharply through his nose. Minutes passed. Behind the ringing in his ears he heard a gentle snickering accompanied by a wet warmth against his cheek. He opened his eyes to see one large, black nostril as he felt the velvet muzzle of his horse brush over his forehead and hair.

He reached up with his right hand and stroked the whiskered

chin both in affection and as means to fend off a second onslaught of the damp lips.

“Falstaff, old boy,” the soldier greeted his mount, “I could use some assistance.” Holding tight to the horse’s halter with his right hand, he clicked his tongue once, and the horse took a half-step forward while keeping his head lowered, lifting the torso of the prostrate man off the ground.

The sharp hiss of inward breath rent the air, and the horse stopped mid-step, twitching his ears, as the man adjusted to a sitting position. Holding tight to the leather strap beneath his hands, the soldier leaned back heavily against the horse’s leg. After some minutes had passed, and the blackness receded, the soldier straightened and issued another single click. The horse stepped forward, and the man groaned loudly as he pulled himself up, grasping from halter to mane, mane to saddle.

He slung his right arm over the saddle and collapsed against the patient animal in a drunken looking embrace, and the two stood motionless as flies buzzed around them and the sun dropped lower in the sky. With great effort, the soldier heaved himself into the saddle, and collapsed over the neck of his horse. Blood trailed down his left arm as it hung uselessly at his side, and slowly dripped from his finger, as his horse gently ambled across a debris field of shattered rock, broken branches, and broken bodies.

Part II

In Country

Caroline's Motivation

Thursday, 17 October 1811

* * *

“Stop. Stop. Stop.”

Each word slipped lazily from Louisa Hurst’s mouth, matching time to the rotation of the carriage wheels, and coincided with the energetic poke of her boney finger to Caroline’s equally boney ribs.

Poke, turn. Poke, turn. Poke, turn.

“Ouch!” Caroline Bingley shot daggers at her sister, Louisa Hurst, née Bingley, who leaned into a cushion beside her on forward facing bench inside their carriage, eyes squeezed tight. A perfectly executed scowl wasted on her companion. “What was that for?”

“You are doing it again.”

“I am not.”

“You are so.”

“You definitely are,” a dozing Bernard Hurst, opened one eye, “and you are saying it wrong. It is supposed to be four and twenty *naughty boys* baked in a pie. You are doing blackbirds. There is nothing shocking about baking blackbirds. Though I imagine blackbirds would make a meager, dry old pie. It is supposed to be boys.”

“No one would bake a boy pie. That is disgusting,” Caroline sulked, “And I wasn’t doing it in the first place.”

“Yes, you were,” both Hursts chorused. They exchanged matching grins, then Hurst shifted back into his own nest of cushions against the squabs. His heavy breathing soon filled the close space.

Louisa reached a hand to Caroline. "Did you have the dream again?"

"No."

"Were you thinking of mother again?"

"No, no I was not," Caroline turned away from her sister's over-concerned gaze. "Do not trouble yourself LouLou. I am fine. I promise you. Stuck in a carriage with no distractions...that is all. You know how I feel about long trips."

Her sister squeezed her fingers, "If you promise, I shall leave you be...but you really must be careful about singing those nursery rhymes. People will talk."

"Oh let them talk. They will talk anyway, they always do."

"Is that what has disturbed you? Did someone say something awful to you at supper last night? Is that why you left early?"

Louisa gave her that look that should be reserved for orphaned kittens or three-legged dogs, glassy-eyed and concerned. That look that might make Caroline dissolve in a puddle of tears if she let it touch her heart.

"Nothing more than usual..." Caroline began to wave her off then thought better of it. The more she told Louisa, the sooner the look of pity and concern would be replaced with something, anything that would allow Caroline to tamp down those chafed feelings and go about her business of staring out the window again.

"Oh fine, I shall tell you. Yes...it was that horrid, little, florid-faced Hannah Headdington...Huntington...whatever her name. She made a sly allusion to my coming out that made everyone around us just laugh and laugh. She looked at me with all wide-eyed innocence and commented how much I must enjoy such an extensive wardrobe considering I get a new one every season since I have been out, and *three* years means lots of gowns.

"And then all the others piled on, discussing at length how much fashion has changed in *three* years. How it probably did not matter as far north as Yorkshire, because Yorkshire is so far from London that the latest trends still have not arrived *three* years later..."

Caroline straightened her spine. No tears. She would not cry. Tears were not for her.

"Did Miss Haddington call you the name?"

"She did."

"Oh I could pull out all fifteen hairs on her bare pink head!"

Louisa's sympathetic look for wayward baby animals was

replaced by a fierceness that Caroline loved — Louisa would defend her tooth and nail. It was comforting. And pushed the tears back.

Mr. Hurst let fly a particularly loud snort. Or was it a laugh? He snuffled, “Lou Lou dear, are you well? Who is this you are planning to assault? And if I may ask, why?” He did not remove the length of scarf he had resting over his eyes.

“I am well, Bernie. It is just this horrible girl who has been relentlessly cruel to Caroline since...”

The pause felt supremely awkward to Caroline, even in such familial company. It felt an eternity. It lasted but a second.

“Well, Miss Haddington has doggedly insulted Caro since they were in boarding school together at Miss Ryall’s. Miss Haddington calls her...Shop Girl.”

A particularly jolting rut shook the carriage, and Mr. Hurst made some unintelligible grumbling sounds and removed the scarf, his eyes landing squarely on Caroline. “I cannot believe you let her get away with that bit of obvious offense without so much as a returning salvo.”

He raised an eyebrow at her, “Well?”

Caroline could not suppress a smug grin that stretched from cheek to cheek. “I may have replied that although I do possess *four* seasons of gowns, I do not, in fact, own a single turban.”

Louisa cackled and Hurst looked a bit confused. “This Miss Haddington likes a turban, does she?”

“Her hair is tragically thin. She has taken to wearing turbans to every evening gathering since she took her bow. She used to wear wigs when we were at Miss Ryall’s. I may have tied a curl from her wig to her chair one day. And the wig may have pulled off her head entirely when she stood...to the great amusement of all present.”

An appreciative laugh poured from her brother. “Well-played, Shop Girl, well-played.”

“Bernard!” Louisa kicked his leg with her stockinged foot. He seized it and began massaging away her annoyance. It appeared quite effective, and at the same time made Caroline shudder in revulsion. When had Louisa removed her shoes? Why would one do such a thing in a coach? And why did her brother Hurst find it necessary to make such a public display? So revolting.

Caroline averted her eyes, “You two certainly stayed at the Pierrepont’s late. Dancing the night away?”

“Goodness no, not dancing,” Louisa laughed. “Cards. Bernard’s

friends arrived after you left. It was quite the spectacle. They took over a table, and of course, Bernard had to join. The stakes were quite high, so high that the game became *the* event of the ball. It was a positive crush around the table, so much so that the dance floor must have been empty. I thought I might expire from the lack of air and all the smoke.”

Hurst grunted.

“You must both be thick-headed from all the wine and whiskey you drank,” Caroline snorted, looking back at her sister and her husband.

“I did not indulge in a single drop.” Louisa replied, looking very self-satisfied.

“I drank enough for both of us and then some,” Hurst offered from behind closed eyes. “Had to — it is an essential element of my strategy. Keep the spirits flowing until everyone is good and foxed. I can outdrink an ox.”

He sat up looking suddenly serious. “You cannot share that with anyone, Caroline. You must swear to it.”

“My word is my bond, Bernard. I shall take your secret to my grave.”

They even shook on it.

“He is being rather dramatic, I know, my sweet sister, but Bernie does not exaggerate. He won last night.” Louisa lowered her voice though she sounded positively giddy, “Thousands of pounds.”

“Thousands of pounds?”

“Yes! My Bernard,” she exhaled in a girlish sigh.

Louisa gave him a secretive smile, and he, Mr. Bernard Hurst, winked back.

“Do not feel you must stay awake to entertain me,” Caroline quickly interjected before the foot rub recommenced. “You must be very tired from such an exhilarating and endless night. Do return to your restful peace. We cannot have but another hour of travel, and I am perfectly content to take in the scenery.”

*The king was in his counting house,
Counting out his money;
The queen was in the parlor,
Eating bread and honey.*

* * *

Poke. “Shh. You are doing it *again*.”

Caroline looked blandly about the conveyance and shrugged lightly, “It is just a simple nursery rhyme.”

“Better you practice some lullabies,” Louisa pulled the carriage rug more tightly around her shoulders and nestled into the cushion nest around her. Caroline rolled her eyes at her sister then shielded them against the flat sun as she gazed unseeing at the dull landscape. Perhaps she should leave off the blackbirds for a while.

The distance between London and this Netherfield Hall her brother had leased was tolerable, just over three hours. It was certainly an easier distance than the much longer and more tedious route to Pemberley. Visiting Pemberley was, of course, worth it. Mr. Darcy was at Pemberley. And traveling to Pemberley was nothing at all compared to that painful and interminable journey between her childhood home in Scarborough and the Miss Ryall’s Boarding School for Girls in Weymouth. Now that was torturous.

Weymouth.

She hadn’t thought of Weymouth in some time. Had not allowed herself to think of Weymouth. It was a sad, sorry place in her memory — one of lonesome quietude, multitudinous mistakes, and countless corrections. Caroline did hold a certain sentimental fondness for Miss Ryall, as one would a beloved aunt. Miss Ryall had been kind, almost like a bossier older sister.

Of course, Miss Ryall had overseen the sort of education a girl should have, from etiquette to embroidery. But more importantly, she had taught Caroline what is expected when moving amongst her betters, as well as a startlingly helpful technique for holding her tongue. Caroline was never good at holding her tongue, but could

now — when it suited her. She held her tongue enough to be accepted back into Sloan School in London after a few years.

Caroline still chanted nursery rhymes in her head when confronted by people or situations that made her want to either cry or shout. Because crying was weak, and Miss Ryall insisted that ladies never shouted. Which apparently true ladies never did, even if Caroline longed for a good shout. True ladies only cried when it suited their purposes, namely to appear fragile and of delicate sensibility. Which Caroline certainly was not. Even if she sometimes felt like she could break.

All of those valuable lessons, yet Caroline could not help but consider her time spent at school in Weymouth as exile. Unwanted. Alone.

At Miss Ryall's, nearly all the girls were just like her — of the lesser local gentry or born to some prosperous neighborhood tradesman — with the exception of the florid and nearly hairless Miss Haddington. Miss Haddington loved to lord her baron of a father over the others. She would have been perfect for Sloan School. Not Caroline. She was the mere daughter of a lucky merchant, made wealthy through an astute investment in a shipping company in Yorkshire.

But she alone was the only student so far from home. The other girls whispered that she was an orphan...or worse. She alone never had visitors. She alone had been sent down from the prestigious Sloan School. Banished. Unwanted.

Despite appreciating Miss Ryall's exacting standards and unexpected sororal kindnesses, and despite forming a few fleeting friendships, Caroline could only remember Weymouth as the place where she had been abandoned.

No mother's love, no father's adoration. Not even a sibling's protection. She had been removed to as remote a location as possible from her childhood home, like a broken doll relegated to the bottom of a trunk in a dusty old nursery.

Caroline rolled her head from side to side and stretched out as best she could without touching either of her dozing companions and glanced out the window. The countryside held no appeal. It was all bare branches and waning light. She stared for some time at her brother Hurst.

He had gone to comfortable fat. She had seen it coming. Even before Caroline stood up beside her sister in church, watching as

Louisa pledged herself for all eternity to this second son of a lesser baronet. He was not *unattractive* then, she mused, and he had his charms. He certainly made Louisa laugh, and he was a loyal friend.

Hurst had a house in town. And yes, Hurst could claim the distinction of sometimes running with the fast and fashionable set in London. He was known by name to the Prince Regent himself, all due to a mutual love of cards, horses, and the banquet table. Hurst even held the privilege of claiming a loose sort of friendship with Fitzwilliam Darcy, as the two were at Cambridge together, even if they studied at different colleges.

Caroline tilted her head and shrugged a shoulder, silently acknowledging that her brother Hurst was not simply a second son, but a reasonably *well-connected* second son. In fact, Hurst stood to inherit some aunt or other's country estate in addition to the house in Town on Grosvenor Square. So he was indisputably a gentleman in every sense of the word that mattered to society. A sloppy, snoring sort of gentleman.

One who had recently taken to frowning at her in a very ungentlemanly manner if she said something even just a little peevish to Louisa. She shifted and watched her sister doze.

Regardless of his connections and his soon to be inherited country estate, how Louisa settled for such a one as Bernard Hurst was a mystery. As far as Caroline could make out, only two solutions were possible. Either her sister had panicked after failing to secure a more handsome, titled suitor, and so settled for Bernie Hurst. Or...and this was almost inconceivable...Louisa's marriage to Hurst was a love match. Love.

Caroline snorted lightly herself, "Love match indeed."

She froze. She checked to see whether her injudicious comment had been overheard. Assured that both Hursts remained asleep, Caroline gave up on the mystery of the Hurst marriage and leaned her head against the cold carriage window. Brown and gray, twigs and hay.

She shook her head to clear it of all unproductive thoughts. The past was of no concern. Caroline had plans. Plans which included neither sentimentality nor love, and those plans were to finally come to fruition in Hertfordshire.

No one fashionable spoke of Meryton in Hertfordshire. In fact, the entire county of Hertfordshire was likely just one big pasture. Caroline had been quite vocal about preferring Derbyshire to

Hertfordshire, but her dear brother Charles waived her off, claiming that he preferred to be closer to London.

So she pointedly withheld any expressions of interest in her brother's new home. Better to let Charles feel indebted to her for agreeing to act as mistress of his estate than to reveal how excited she was to serve in that very role.

Since her come out three years prior, Caroline had certainly enjoyed her share of society. She had danced with handsome men, men blessed with greater wealth than looks, and men with reasonably impressive titles. She had displayed her skill on the pianoforte and garnered much admiration and no little jealousy at teas hosted by grand dames and other assemblies of fine ladies and gentlemen.

But never had she been granted the pure pleasure and freedom of running her own house. She would plan her own parties and eat a meal of food she had selected herself...for the first time in her life she would not be dependent upon the whims and desires of others. All of her hard-earned talents, the outcome of so many hours practicing to become a lady of some consequence would be realized.

Finally, at long last, Charles had taken a residence. She would have a home for the first time in years. At least until Charles took a wife.

She shook her head — best not consider that unpleasant prospect. Besides, Charles was too young to wed. Too young and too capricious. Charles fell in love every time the wind changed direction.

So for the foreseeable future, she was to be Mistress of Netherfield Hall. How well that sounded! Caroline had been granted a dual boon — home rule and an opportunity to shine. But there was more. The corners of her mouth turned up at the very thought...

Residing as her brother's most particular guest for the season was one Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy. Darcy and Charles were already installed at Netherfield Hall. This was by far the most potent lure of all. Caroline was all eager anticipation and could not wait to reach her destination, her destiny.

"Fitzwilliam Darcy," her sigh frosted the pane of glass. "What a fine catch he would be. He will be, *will be*."

"What is that, Caro? Have we arrived?"

Caroline started from her reverie, "No dearest. You may rest a while longer."

Louisa smiled and turned back into her cushion.

Caroline drew a heart in the frost, then wiped the glass clean. Her brother had no finer a man amongst his acquaintance; well-mannered, if a bit stiff, richer than Midas, if not titled, respectful and eminently respectable...and the most attractive man she had ever seen.

Of course Mr. Darcy had, to date, eluded every eligible maiden on the marriage mart, and more to the point, had made his lack of interest in her own person rather clear. But he would be living under the same roof as her for some time.

While the Bingleys stayed at his unparalleled estate last summer, he had easily evaded her attempts at captivation. At Netherfield, he would lack a study in which he could hide away. There would be no steward with whom he could conveniently claim a prior engagement when Caroline asked him to join her for...well for any activity. Mr. Darcy really had managed to politely decline every application she made for his company.

Undoubtedly Fitzwilliam Darcy was of the same mind as those monstrously mean misses from school, and more lately from the ballrooms and parlors across town. To those uncivil and contemptuous creatures, Caroline was but the upstart daughter of a tradesman — not fit to grace their company, not good enough to marry their brothers, and certainly not of the sort of pedigree Mr. Darcy sought in the future Mistress of Pemberley.

But she would make him see how far she had come, see beyond parentage and ancestry.

When she set her mind upon something, Caroline could move mountains to achieve a goal. And her goal was to land a gentleman of exquisite, unsullied, unquestionable reputation. It was her only incontestable way out and way up; Charles and other males could attend university...purchase an estate...buy their way into respectability. Caroline could but marry. And marry well she would!

Hurst's head lolled back against the cushion, and he drew in a loud, window-rattling breath. Caroline returned her attention to the road ahead.

"Yes," she murmured, "Darcy will do quite nicely."

Arrival at Netherfield Hall

The Hursts and Miss Bingley arrived to little fanfare. Too little fanfare, in fact, to fulfill Caroline's hopeful expectations. Charles had never been one to make much of a fuss over his sisters, but to be absent entirely? It was truly beyond the pale.

Instead of the welcome of her brother's open arms and beaming smile, they were greeted by a footman, who to Caroline's further disappointment *was not in livery*.

That would change immediately, or at least as soon as Caroline could design and order uniforms. His boots were worn and his cravat as limp as his movements were slow. Worst of all, he was not young and attractive. A footman should be impressive...strong, silent, crisp, and well... attractive.

Once inside the door, they heard quick steps which were followed by the emergence of a thin and dignified looking man who was thankfully infinitely better put together than the footman. He bowed before them.

"Mr. Nicholls at your service, Miss?"

"Miss *Bingley*," Caroline nodded her head as she untied her bonnet strings. "Thank you, Mr. Nicholls. Where may I find my brother, Mr. Bingley?"

"He is without, Miss Bingley."

Caroline huffed a perturbed little cough.

"Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy were to take tea with the Lucas family." Nicholls stood quietly and patiently, waiting for Caroline's next words.

She wanted to heave a sigh, but Mr. Nicholls, with his perfectly wooden demeanor and his exemplary, expressionless butler face disallowed any such display. She found she wanted to impress him with her lady-like behavior on this first meeting between restrained butler and Mistress of Netherfield Hall.

To that end, she introduced the Hursts who tarried at the threshold. Mr. Nicholls bowed solemnly and nodded to the insufficient footman, who relieved Caroline of her cloak and bonnet then turned to the Hursts. Louisa turned back to oversee the sorting

of their trunks, and Caroline addressed Mr. Nicholls with raised eyebrow and firm tone, "I had expected to be introduced to the staff?"

"Yes, my lady, quite so, and you shall be. We did not anticipate introducing the staff until your official arrival. Tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?"

"Yes, Mr. Bingley spoke with Mrs. Nicholls and myself and has ordered a fine dinner with no less than three courses. For tomorrow."

Caroline's cheeks reddened, "I see."

"I believe you shall find your chambers ready to receive you. Perhaps you would prefer to inspect the staff after you have refreshed yourself from your journey?"

"An excellent idea, Mr. Nicholls, yes, that will do nicely. I would like to tour the house. My brother has spoken highly of your Mrs. Nicholls. Perhaps she would be available to guide me?"

Mr. Nicholls bowed and his wispy cloud-like hair seemed to waver in the air, a second behind his head, "As you wish, Miss."

Pacified by such a dutiful reply, Caroline continued, examining the butler closely for any hint of his impression of her, "For supper we will content ourselves with...some cold meats, cheese, and fruit. And as to inspecting the staff, tomorrow after breakfast would be satisfactory."

The white fluff waved at her in approval as his head dipped once more, even if he maintained his butler face.

"Yes ma'am. If that is all, I shall summon Mrs. Nicholls to show you to your rooms."

Caroline dipped her head as did Nicholls, and a pas de deux ensued, a graceful dance of ostrich feather and fluffy hair.

* * *

Mrs. Nicholls led the party from Grosvenor Square up a long, sweeping staircase to their respective chambers. Caroline refused to let brother's absence diminish her enthusiasm — his inattention to

detail was legendary.

“If it is agreeable, Miss Bingley, I shall return in half hour’s time to take you on a tour of the hall. Your lady’s maid, Blanchet, arrived an hour before you with Mr. and Mrs. Hursts servants. I have assigned them rooms in the servant’s hall, and she should be settled in now. I will send her up to attend you in a moment.” Mrs. Nicholls nodded as she quietly shut the door, before Caroline could even correct her pronunciation of poor Blanchet’s name.

“Blawn-shay, Mrs. Nicholls, in the French style,” Caroline said to the empty room. Because Caroline was alone. Blissfully, delightfully alone.

She stretched her arms out and turned a circle taking in her room. Her room. Her rather large and well-appointed room, in her rather large and well-appointed home. Charles had chosen well. Netherfield Hall was impressive.

Caroline stepped to the closest window. Her quarters overlooked the drive. Beyond the palings stretched fallow fields, rolling hills, and a few cows to complete the bucolic scene. She rubbed a section of curtain between thumb and forefinger. The velvet was soft and beautiful, not entirely to Caroline’s taste, but for once she did not care.

She stepped to the center of the room and came to an abrupt stop, hand to mouth. She had an entire house to make over as she pleased. Or not at all. As she pleased.

Caroline’s joy was complete. Laughter bubbled out as she twirled about on the carpet at the foot of her bed. She flopped backwards on the counterpane and sighed contentedly. “As I please,” she whispered to the empty space around her.

The Assembly

Friday, 18 October, 1811

* * *

“Do you think the gold or the green flatters me more,” came Louisa’s voice from behind the screen in her sitting room.

“The green,” Caroline replied, eyes never leaving the copy of *La Belle Assemblée* in her hands, “definitely the emerald green.” They had arrived only yesterday and already Caroline missed the shopping in London.

Louisa appeared before Caroline and twirled. “Well?” she asked and stood waiting in front of her sister.

Her efforts were rewarded with a toothy smile from Caroline who relinquished her magazine and stood beside her sister, “Very becoming! I envy you that bold color, sister. You shall be the most fashionable and beautiful by far.”

“With the exception of you, perhaps?” asked Louisa affectionately. “You do look particularly well this evening, Caroline. I do not recall seeing this gown before. Is it new?”

“Not new, just one of my summer gowns refreshed with a bit of *barège* wool so I do not perish from cold here in Hertfordshire...all for the sake of meeting our new neighbors at some dreadful public assembly in the dead of winter.”

“You can hardly call October the dead of winter, Caroline, although it is rather cold today. The new overskirt should help, and it is absolutely lovely, as are you. I am impressed with your uncharacteristic economy and the simple cut you selected. Not a frill or bit of lace on you. Whatever can be your motivation?”

A lady’s maid tucked curls here and there around the matching

bandeau in Louisa's hair in a very unstudied intentionality, as she sat at her dressing table. Louisa smiled and nodded to the girl, "Thank you, Taylor, it is perfect. You may take the rest of the night for yourself. Mr. Hurst can assist me when we return."

The maid blushed a little, flashed a quick smile and curtsy and was gone.

Caroline rolled her eyes, "Must you refer to your intimacies with Bernard? And in front of the help. It is just revolting to consider. And embarrassing."

"Someday, you too will have a husband to unbutton your gowns, and I assure you, you will find it anything but revolting."

Caroline snorted. "I have been out for two and a half seasons, Louisa, and I still have no husband. But if I did have a husband, I would not refer to him like...like that...and to my maid.

"As for the dress," she smoothed her skirt, "I may not be allowed the beautiful, bold colors of you wedded ladies, but after three seasons of frothy white confections, I felt ready for a change. I am not exactly some blushing innocent. I have heard more scandalous talk from the mouths of young misses dressed like angels than any gentleman could possibly imagine. Lace and frills exhaust me, as does the whole ridiculous game. More and more, I am drawn to a simpler style."

Louisa cocked an eyebrow at her and touched the small border of darker emerald at her neckline. "Does my own lace offend you then?"

"No! Of course your gown is beautiful. I did not mean to—"

"And I suppose..." Louisa interrupted loudly and paused before turning dramatically to the massive cherry wardrobe, "I shall have to give this somewhat...how did you say it? This frothy confection to someone less fatigued by frills."

Louisa raised a cream colored shawl from the drawer, turned to Caroline and unfolded one corner to reveal a pattern of seed pearls and deeper cream stitching along its ruffled edge. "Pity. It is a remarkably close match to the color of that reworked gown you are wearing..."

Caroline's eyes opened wide as she stared at the fine wrapper in her sister's hands. "It is so beautiful, and it is an exact match. How did you know?"

"I may have asked your maid to purchase an extra length of the same fabric she used for the skirting on your gown."

Caroline popped up and flung her arms around her sister in a tight embrace, squeezing the air out of Louisa in a loud wheeze.

"Now, now sister," she smiled affectionately, squeezed Caroline in return, then pushed back, "you'll wrinkle us."

Louisa looked on as Caroline posed in front of the mirror with her new wrapper. "You know...that gown looks very familiar...I believe the cut is very similar to what Miss Georgiana Darcy wore this past summer at Pemberley...the one she wore to the ball given by Mr. Darcy's neighbor, Mr. Woolley."

Caroline angled herself to avoid meeting her sister's gaze. "You mean Mr. Woolley with the rather bad skin? That was a lovely ball. Mr. Woolley is regrettably unattractive but so kind. I almost felt sorry not to dance with him a second—"

Louisa cut her off, "We were speaking of your gown, not of the lamentably complected Mr. Woolley, Caroline."

"It is possible that it looks similar to something Georgiana wore...I suppose it is fair to say... that it is...it is the same dress. I may have visited dear Georgiana's modiste without you." Caroline had the good grace to wince as she revealed her betrayal.

"Caroline! You know that I have been on her waiting list for longer than you have been formally out in public!"

"Oh Louisa, I am sorry. I was out and about with Blanchet, picking up feathers for one of my bonnets, when this very fashionable woman approached and admired the clever design of my pelisse...the blue one with the gold braid that Blanchet made for me, the one with the military flair? The accent was obvious, and Blanchet and the woman began to speak in French. They discovered that they are from neighboring villages, and they got along quite well, both being displaced French and all—"

"Caroline, we will miss the assembly entirely if you do not just come out with it."

"Madame Devy did not take me on as a client, but she and Blanchet have become fast friends. Madame Devy may have been persuaded to show Blanchet some of the designs she created for Georgiana Darcy."

"Ha!" exclaimed Louisa, "You need not hedge with me. You have probably copied the entirety of 'dear Georgiana's wardrobe. You did, did you not?"

Caroline deflated. "Madame Devy has a fine eye and such a way with delicate material. She really is a genius with a needle."

“Well, I am entirely jealous that your Blanchet can recreate a design so faithfully. You must ask her to work with Taylor and show her how it is done. The gown is gorgeous,” Louisa took her sister’s hand, “But Caroline, you must not be so obvious in your bid for Mr. Darcy. He is so...so serious-minded. He is very principled and very observant. He might just think you stole one of his sister’s dresses.”

Caroline lowered her head, “It is as you say. But what of it? I think this gown is beautiful, even if Madame Devy’s style is so obvious. And what if Mr. Darcy does notice? Would that be such a bad thing?”

“It is not the dress that concerns me, Caro. Or even Mr. Darcy’s opinions. The gown is beautiful and the simple lines suit you.” Louisa softened her tone. “But please be careful who you give your heart to, sister. I am afraid Fitzwilliam Darcy is immune to all feminine creatures. I have watched him move through society for years now. He has rejected many a beautiful face. He has concern for neither title nor wealth.”

Louisa drew the wrap over her sister’s shoulders, enfolding her in a hug. “I’m afraid he is just not for you, Caroline. I saw no symptoms of affection for you over the summer, and his heart is no more likely to soften here in the wilds of Hertfordshire than it was at his home in Derbyshire. I just want you to find happiness...”

“Happiness? Affection?” Caroline pulled back. “The heart has nothing at all to do with it, Louisa. Do not wish me happiness. Wish me good hunting.”

“Hunting a husband is not recommended, Caroline. Love is not a game of predator and prey...and only the unsavory ones go sniffing around bait. It is much better to let love reveal itself in its own time.”

Louisa stood and pulled at her sister’s hands, “But come, let us leave this talk behind. We have a neighborhood to meet. If Charles shares one trait with you, it is that of impatience, and he is likely pacing the halls, stewing over our late departure to the assembly.”

“Thank you, Louisa. For both your concern and for your gift. The shawl is truly exquisite, so thoughtful. Now I will not have to worry about catching cold.”

Louisa looked over her shoulder with a grin as she opened the door. “If you grow too warm, maybe you can use it as a snare to capture Mr. Darcy.”

* * *

The room was too crowded, too warm, and too loud by half. Caroline stood erect at the back of the assembly hall. She itched to dab a handkerchief to her brow, but refused to let the cream of Hertfordshire society see her sweat. She had danced her first set with her brother Charles, and the second with Mr. Hurst before he escaped to the card room. The third, with some overfamiliar son of a Sir William Lewis or was it Lucas, and at long last, she partnered Mr. Darcy for the fourth.

Caroline was sure that she had caught him glancing at her person in an appreciative and very male manner at the start of the set, which made her feel light and lovely, as though her feet danced several inches above the smooth wooden floor. Then she tried to draw Mr. Darcy into conversation.

The lackluster assembly room. Nod.

The honking musicians. Hmph.

His skill and style in the dance. Deeper nod.

Not even the mention of his beloved Derbyshire moved him to speak, and so, after several failed topics, Caroline left him to his silence. He was an excellent dancer, which was some solace, and they drew the notice of the room as they weaved in and out to the music which was satisfying. But when the set ended, he walked her to her sister's side and after mumbling a lifeless expression of gratitude, retreated to the wall where he skulked around for the remainder of the assembly.

Frustrating man.

Darcy had complimented her attire as he handed her into the carriage. He had singled her out for a set, and he held her quite firmly as they danced. And there was that moment when he had stared at her rather openly. But now? Nothing.

She had been dismissed. Her conversation, her witty rejoinders were all lost on him as he stood mutely in the shadows off to the side.

One could almost accuse him of sulking, though over what she

could not say.

Caroline was equally disheartened to understand that Sir William Lucas, and yes it was Lucas not Lewis, was the only titled gentleman in attendance. Louisa told her. Then she left to make sure Mr. Hurst was not playing too high in the card room.

As if all that were not bad enough, even untitled gentlemen were in rather short supply, and none were even remotely fashionable. The only thing in abundance were lively country girls in dated dresses.

So she decided to mirror Darcy's aloofness, and posed within his field of vision and looking out at the dancers, face displaying none of her irritation. Butler face.

She was standing thusly, reflecting perfect, elegant boredom, when she suddenly pitched forward as a weight slammed into her from behind.

"Oh fie, Percy Lucas! Look where you are going! You forced me into Miss Bingley and now she will hate me forever and we have not even spoken!"

Caroline took two large and ungainly steps to right herself and then turned to see the retreating form of a young girl skipping away, leaving behind a squealing trail of laughter, bouncing curls, and a red-faced Mr. Percy Lucas. Her own cheeks flamed in embarrassment at being part of such a display. Could she look more ridiculously in front of Mr. Darcy? Apparently, yes.

Mr. Percy Lucas made a grand show of taking her hand and bowing low before her. "My most profound apologies Miss Bingley. To have been the instrument of making such a delicate young lady experience such discomfort...well, it was not entirely my fault as Miss Lydia really caused the stir, but I am quite abashed at having disordered you so. Perhaps I could atone by engaging you for the next set?" He smiled at her with overly large teeth.

"I assure you that will not be necessary, Mr. Lucas. I am not disordered in the slightest."

"But I wish to make amends—"

"I have already promised the next set to my brother, Mr. Lucas, but I thank you for your consideration," Caroline rolled her eyes and turned back to face the room.

As if she had conjured him, Charles emerged from the throng, and smiled at her. Caroline felt unexpectedly warmed by her brother's display of affection. He looked back from whence he came

and crooked his arm, tilting his head encouragingly.

Out of the circle of dancers stepped a beautiful blond, like the Birth of Venus from the waves. The stunning woman smiled softly at Charles as he gently guided her through the crowd. Radiant. She was golden, like a painting of the Madonna, and Caroline would not be surprised to see a blinding halo spring forth from her perfectly curled hair. How had half the night passed without Caroline noticing such formidable competition?

The girl's features and figure were equally fine, so fine that Caroline almost fell as a sharp pang of inadequacy stabbed her chest, as her mouth went dry. She shrank upon herself, shoulders hunching, as a bead of perspiration trickled down her back. This country girl was the most beautiful person Caroline had ever seen. To make matters worse, she emerged from the throng poised, serene, and seemed to float, bathed in her own golden aura.

No silly titters or vulgar shrieks would come from this one.

Caroline's palms itched as she attempted to squash the creeping inferiority that threatened, stealing her composure bit by bit as Charles led the girl closer. Her brother had found his Hertfordshire angel. They were all angels to Charles, but this one might be a certifiable deity.

He stopped directly in front of Caroline and turned his beaming smile to the angel. "Miss Bennet, may I have the pleasure of introducing you to my youngest sister, Miss Caroline Bingley? Caroline, I present to you a most talented dancer and charming companion, Miss Jane Bennet of Longbourn."

The angel offered the most tranquil smile and a soft yet warm, "How do you do?" as she dropped in a natural and graceful curtsy.

Caroline could not form words. Her tongue stuck fast inside her pasty mouth. She darted a glance at Mr. Darcy to see if he had noticed the heavenly creature in front of her.

"And here is her sister," Charles opened an arm to include yet another woman who approached holding a cup of punch, "Miss Elizabeth, allow me to introduce my sister, Caroline Bingley. And here is my good friend, Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy."

"How do you do, Miss Jane Bennet, Miss Elizabeth Bennet?" Caroline finally gained her senses and dipped into an elegant if short curtsy, as low as the skirt of her stylishly narrow gown permitted. She rose with a nod and a smile that didn't quite reach her eyes.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Darcy push quickly from his wall. He stepped forward with haste and bowed to each of the Miss Bennets, and two red spots popped on his cheeks.

"I am very well, thank you. May I ask how you are finding Hertfordshire, Miss Bingley, Mr. Darcy?" replied this Jane Bennet angel creature. The girl barely registered Mr. Darcy and curiously focused all of her enthusiastic attention on Caroline.

"I have found but little, Miss Bennet, as we are so recently arrived," Caroline jumped to answer, happy to keep Miss Beautiful Bennet's focus away from Mr. Darcy.

"Tell me, are your assemblies generally so well-attended? So many ladies seeking partners. In the dance, I mean, of course. Such a shame to see so many misses competing for the same hands...it seems our numbers are unhappily uneven."

Miss Bennet acknowledged it was regrettably so, while her sister's pert looking lips turned up ever so slightly. She looked amused, but not as if Caroline had said something terribly witty. As if she was laughing at her. Just like a Miss Haddington would.

"And you Miss Elizabeth...you seem to be enjoying the assembly, even if you have had to sit out a dance or two. Good for you. Tell me, who amongst the men of Meryton is considered best dancer?"

"Oh the best dancer is undoubtedly the man who can be troubled to ask for a set! It is exactly as you said, we are sorely lacking in *gentlemen* tonight at our modest little assembly. Is it not a sorry state of affairs, that so many of us ladies are left without partners, Miss Bingley?" Elizabeth Bennet tilted her head to the side as she finished her thought, looking as though she enjoyed bedeviling her present company.

Caroline had the distinct notion that Miss Elizabeth was not speaking to her at all, but rather directing her conversation to none other than Mr. Darcy. That man's face flushed spectacularly in response. It was no trick of the poor lighting. Mr. Darcy, her Mr. Darcy stood blushing like a school boy in front of this Eliza Bennet of Longbourn.

Miss Elizabeth brightened and turned to Charles, flashing him a dimpled smile, "Your brother, however, has acquitted himself most admirably. He has proven a most steadfast partner, dancing with us all, not missing a single set."

Charles beamed at her heart-felt compliment, and offered Miss

Elizabeth a short bow in kind, as the tips of his ears turned pink. Did Miss Eliza possess some unearthly power to make all men blush on cue?

“I truly thank you for your attentions to we middling misses of Meryton, Mr. Bingley,” she curtsied and bobbed up quickly, “but you must excuse me. I have promised the next to the younger Mr. Goulding, and I would be deeply disappointed should he be *tempted* to find a more *tolerable* partner for the set.”

And with that Elizabeth Bennet gracefully spun and exited before anyone could so much as acknowledge her departing comment.

“Your sister is a most energetic sort of young lady,” Charles commented in her wake.

“She is indeed. She greets everyone and everything with such liveliness,” Jane Bennet smiled warmly at him as if no one else existed. “Sometimes she does tease so. I cannot imagine what she was about just now — Jeremiah Goulding would never act so disgracefully as to refuse a dance once offered.”

Charles Bingley positively twinkled as he looked pointedly at his friend and replied, “Perhaps it is her way of encouraging us to do our duty as gentlemen, instead of standing about like idiots.”

Elizabeth’s retreating figure was swallowed by the crowd, and Charles offered Caroline his arm, “I believe I too have a commitment to honor. Shall we enjoy another set, sister?”

Caroline gladly stepped forward to take her brother’s arm, feeling a bit off balance and ready to drop the charged conversation.

“Oh and Darcy, do be a gentleman and offer your services to Miss Bennet in my absence, would you?” Charles chuckled as he stepped away, Caroline in tow.

She craned her neck and glimpsed Darcy bowing deeply then smiling as he took the arm of beguiling Jane Bennet.

The evening had taken a decided turn for the worse.

An Invitation for Miss Bennet

“Charles, I am exhausted, and I cannot summon the energy to make out the invitations much less host a dinner party this week,” Caroline called from the chaise near the fire. “Can you not simply be content with the fact that we have accepted every invitation sent to us by our neighbors? We have dined in company three times this week, taken tea twice, attended a card party, sat for endless morning calls, and sat in the Philips’s parlor above an hour Sunday after church after they invited us to an impromptu spiritual social.”

“That, Caroline, is exactly my point.” Charles stretched his legs out over the ottoman in front of him. “We have attended several gatherings, and enjoyed the good company and hospitality of our new friends, and have yet to return the favor. We will be perceived as ungenerous, or worse.”

“Do not be ridiculous Charles. Louisa and I have had all the ladies of the neighborhood to tea, and have returned each and every social call with a quickness that would impress even you. I, for one, do not know how I could come up with enough to talk about over a three course dinner. If I hear one more frightful narration of the birth of Mr. Long’s mare last week, I cannot be held accountable for my actions.”

“Or how Sir William Lucas was presented at St. James,” added Louisa from the window seat.

“Nothing of note happens here to talk about, Charles. No one of consequence visits these environs, and I have nothing more to say to these people,” Caroline finished in a pout.

“You would do well by actually deigning to ask *these people* about themselves. You might find the conversation more interesting if you take a genuine interest in others. You can be so exasperating, Caroline,” Charles flicked the arm of his chair.

Caroline saw Darcy’s eyes crinkle, before he raised the book he was hiding behind higher and covered his stupid face. Charles seldom checked her behavior, and certainly not before guests. She was mortified.

“My conversational skills are not what is lacking, Charles,” she

retorted hotly, “it is a lack of commonality. There is no fashion to be found in all of Hertfordshire, I am convinced. The shops are filled with last year’s colors and all of the publications available are woefully out of date. And did you know that Sir William Lucas’s daughter — the only family in the neighborhood that possesses a title — helps cook pies every weekend? As in works in the kitchen with her cook?”

Caroline looked over to where Darcy sat, but could not make out his reaction as he sunk lower behind his book. Some boring tract on agriculture or animal husbandry, no doubt. Frustrated at the lack of attention from that quarter, she continued, “If we are to host a dinner party, I must insist that you allow me to invite friends from Town in addition to the natives.”

“You, my dear Caroline, may invite anyone you wish, so long as we have rooms available in this house,” Bingley gave her a boyish grin, “and so long as you invite the Bennet family. All of the Bennets. They are such lovely girls.”

Darcy finally lowered the book which had positively enthralled him all evening.

“Jane Bennet is a sweet girl, and undeniably lovely...but her sisters? No. No, Charles it is an impossibility. If we are to host the Bennets of Longbourn, I cannot even consider inviting friends from London.

“Do not be ridiculous, Caroline. There is nothing wrong with any of the Bennets.”

“Are you serious? The younger Bennets would chase any eligible man around the table before the first course was cleared. The middle one...Mary, she would offer a ceaseless stream of horrible homilies from her dog-eared copy of Fordyce. The mother would undoubtedly concoct at least one compromise to marry off a daughter before the soup course was finished. And the father? He would watch it all burn to the ground and laugh as he drank you out of port and brandy. The Bennets cannot possibly be on the guest list for our first dinner party at Netherfield.”

“Not the port and brandy!” Hurst exclaimed in mock horror.

Louisa swatted his arm and selected another card from the pile between them. “But Jane Bennet is an undeniably genteel and pretty girl, and I should not mind knowing her better. Her manners are quite pleasing and she has a very kind disposition...”

Hurst grunted in what sounded like approval, but whether he

approved of Louisa's card play or of Jane Bennet, it was hard to tell.

"That settles it then." Caroline clasped her hands. "To please both my brother and sister, I shall invite Jane Bennet to dine with us tomorrow. Alone. And I promise to display a genuine interest in her. I shall ask her all about herself. The evening will be full of nothing but talk of Bennets."

Bingley sighed deeply, "But tomorrow Darcy, Hurst, and I are to dine with the officers."

"That is exactly my point in issuing the invitation, Charles. Miss Bennet simply must join us tomorrow. Louisa and I will be positively at odds with one another by midday without you here to entertain us. Jane Bennet's serene presence will keep us from saying terrible things to one another."

"Well, if you must have company, I can think of no better choice," he relented. "Perhaps you should invite her sister to join the party as well...you know what they say about triangles and all."

"Charles, you must be more specific, she has four sisters."

"Miss Elizabeth then, she is an entertaining sort."

Caroline raised an eyebrow at Darcy. He had praised Eliza Bennet earlier that week, and Caroline had been dying for a way to bring it up, to poke at him with his own words, punish him for admiring anything about that girl. Mr. Darcy had also been miserly in his attentions to Caroline since that evening — always with a book in his hand or out riding with Charles.

"Although I have heard her eyes described as *so fine*, I cannot claim to enjoy her company. She is far too opinionated, and expresses herself as if she has mastered the deepest mysteries."

Bingley barked out a laugh, and although Darcy more graciously attempted to mask his own laugh as a cough, did a poor job of containing his own amusement. "Oh that is truly diverting, Caroline! You finding another opinionated...why...I cannot imagine anyone as ready to offer her opinions as yourself. Too opinionated to suit you! Oh that is rich indeed."

Bingley's eyes watered as he coughed the words out around his laughter. The others were scarcely better, biting lips or holding a hand up to hide their amusement at her expense. The teasing was met with a flat expression from his sister, and the room grew silent, with all occupants staring at Caroline. She tilted her head as if truly considering her brother's comment.

"You have a point, Charles," Caroline flashed a sort of smile at

him, breaking some of the tension, "I have opinions enough, I suppose. In this instance, I am of the opinion that Miss *Eliza* Bennet should be included...in a future invitation. I shall save it for when her pert opinions and fine eyes can be appreciated by a larger audience."

She rose and walked to where her brother sat opposite Darcy. "If the Bennets are what you desire by way of company, I shall gladly extend an invitation to dinner to the entire family for an evening when you will be able to entertain them personally. I will speak with Mrs. Nicholls tomorrow to begin preparations for *your* dinner party and send *your* card around."

Caroline bobbed a quick curtsy, "If you please excuse me, I must send *my* personal compliments and invitation to the far milder and more agreeable sister, Jane Bennet."

And she left the room in a swish of skirts and fake smiles.

* * *

The darkening skies and rolling thunder kept time as Caroline's fingers tapped against the ledge. *Ladybird, ladybird, fly away home...* She stood gazing out the large sitting room windows, the line repeating itself endlessly in her head.

"Perhaps she will not be coming after all. Who would venture out with the promise of such foul weather?"

"The gentlemen most certainly were eager to keep their engagement with Colonel Forster. I expect Jane Bennet would be equally keen on escaping her houseful of sisters for one evening of good company. Come away from the window, Caro, and sit by the fire with me. I know how you detest storms, and you can show me that cunning stitch again that you learned from Miss Fernside."

"The stitch was from Lady Sedgwick," she smiled at her sister, "but I am happy join you by the fire and look at your embroidery."

As Caroline moved to sit beside her sister, the footman opened the doors, and announced Jane Bennet into the room.

"Miss Bennet!" both sisters exclaimed as one.

Jane Bennet stood dripping wet, smelled faintly of horse, and had left a trail of water visible behind her on the polished floor. She dipped into a wavy half-curtsy, "Good evening, Louisa, Caroline. Thank you so much for your kind invitation. Please forgive my appearance...the carriage could not be had..." A bead of water ran from her sodden hair to the tip her nose, where it clung tenaciously.

Both sisters swooped forward at the same time, talking over one another in a flurry of considerate and coaxing words.

"Miss Bennet, you poor dear, you must be chilled to the bone. Let us have a hot bath prepared for you at once."

"Yes, it is just thing when one has been soaked through." Caroline nodded emphatically at the footman to make haste, "My room has the most decadently large soaking tub, and I shall send Blanchet to find the perfect dress for you, as we are of a similar height."

Miss Bennet repeated her distress at arriving in such a state and being such an imposition but quickly gave way to their kindnesses and allowed herself to be spirited away to the family wing.

"We shall have a guest room readied with a warm fire, and you shall be our first official guest. It will be such a lovely diversion. Caroline and I have been left alone with one another for far too long." Louisa offered.

"And I shall have a note dispatched to Longbourn to alert your family that you will spend the night here with us."

Jane was easily persuaded as the storm appeared to be getting stronger rather than weakening, and the sisters would not hear of sending her home on horseback, nor could they send her to Longbourn in the Bingley carriage, it being in Meryton with the gentlemen.

* * *

Later, a much drier Jane appeared in the drawing room, every bit the angel in a borrowed pearl colored gown, hair softly pinned up to allow it to fully dry, her eyes and cheek uncommonly bright.

“There you are. You look much more comfortable, and you wear that dress far better than I ever have,” Caroline offered.

“It is a pity that the gentlemen are dining with the officers. Not only will they too have to contend with all this rain, but your good looks are wasted dining amongst us women. Caroline, I believe that dress was made for Miss Bennet. You should make a gift of it.”

“You know, I believe you are right, Louisa. The color washes me out yet makes Miss Bennet look almost ethereal. Dear Miss Bennet, you must keep the gown. It is from my first season, and I am afraid I was more eager to acquire pretty, new fabric for dresses than to consider how it might look on me.”

Jane flushed still more under such attentions, and apologized again for arriving so untidy a state, and demurred that anyone would appear to her best a gown as fine as the one Caroline had supplied. “But I cannot possibly accept such a generous gift. You have both already gone out of your way to welcome me and put me at ease under the most embarrassing circumstances.”

The ladies of Netherfield would not hear of it, and insisted, and conversation continued as they moved to the dining room for dinner — an exchange of compliments and dissents, as no one wanted to accept credit for any goodness yet looked to lavish praise on the others. They were on first name basis before the first course was served.

True to her word, Caroline tirelessly supplied Miss Bennet with conversation and asked endless questions. If Jane had grown a bit quieter with each reply, it was unnoticed by her companions, as Miss Bennet was good enough to answer each and every question posed. Nor did they notice that Jane was doing more speaking than eating.

“...I too visited Vauxhall Gardens last spring, and it was every bit as magical as you describe, Caroline. I enjoyed the fireworks and was just astonished by all the dazzling lights. Even if my Uncle Gardiner insisted we leave shortly after sunset.”

“I did not realize you had family in London, Jane.”

“Yes, my mother’s brother, a Mr. Edward Gardiner, and his family live in Cheapside.”

Caroline quirked a brow at Louisa, “Cheapside, now where is that exactly, dear Jane?”

“It is a far cry from where you live in Grosvenor Square, but surely you have traveled through Cheapside? Have you never

visited Leadenhall Market? It is a charming place to shop. My uncle's home is on the same street, Gracechurch Street. My aunt likes to say that they live halfway between St. Paul's Cathedral and uncle's warehouses, which makes it convenient to thank God for the many blessings his business provides. Elizabeth and I spend a month with them each year. London is so diverting."

For her part, Miss Bennet was seemingly unaware of the incredulous looks Caroline leveled at her sister through this revelation. That anyone, much less a young lady of single status, would publicly acknowledge such connections rendered Caroline speechless.

Syllabub was served to the silent room.

As Jane raised her spoon, her eyes lowered and head dropped as if in a swoon. A footman was quickly pressed into service and carried Miss Bennet to the waiting guest chamber, with a genuinely concerned Caroline and Louisa following close behind.

The sisters sat with Jane, applying cool cloths to her brow and assuring her that she was not an imposition in the slightest. Heartfelt concerns for her health and comfort were repeated to put Jane at ease, until she finally fell into a restless slumber. Caroline closed the door softly behind them, turned to Louisa and whispered, "I thought country girls were built of hardier stuff."

The sky flashed as a crack of thunder shook the window at the end of the hall, and Caroline squeaked.

Louisa raised an eyebrow, "And I thought grown ladies were not afraid of lightning, but we all have our frailties, do we not? If the sick room does not appeal to you sister, perhaps you should retire for the evening and let Blanchet bring you a soothing posset and send one to Miss Bennet. I will check in on her. You needn't tax yourself."

Louisa slipped back into Miss Bennet's chamber and closed the door behind her before Caroline could respond.

Left alone in the darkened hall, she bit down on her own tongue until it hurt. She looked at the door, shook her head, and hissed, "Only you would say such a callous thing. Jane is a sweet girl." She lifted her hand to the knob but stop short, and her fingers moved to tapping against her leg. With nothing else to do followed her sister's advice and sought out Blanchet. Jane might benefit from a soothing posset, and since she and Louisa had both been exposed, they both should have a soothing posset too.

She tiptoed away from the door. Louisa did not need to know how long she stood outside like a fool, tripped up by her own clever comment.

Invaded by Bennets

Less than a month in-country, and acting as hostess of Netherfield Hall had already lost its sparkle. How had things gone so awry?

As poor Miss Jane Bennet continued to convalesce quietly in the guest wing, traversing Netherfield Hall became rife with peril.

* * *

Jane Bennet was one thing. Confined to her bed, dear Jane had presented Caroline with the opportunity to appear as the best sort of female companion — kind, considerate, and very attentive to the needs of her ailing guest. When the gentlemen returned from their dinner with the officers, Caroline experienced transports of joy when she received Mr. Darcy's firm approbation of her treatment of Miss Bennet — namely of insisting Jane remain at Netherfield until she could be seen by the local apothecary, and sending a footman to confirm said apothecary's attendance upon Miss Bennet the next morning.

Caroline even forwent sharing what little of Darcy's company was available that night and loud noises about preferring to instead sit with Jane, providing whatever comfort she could. When she returned to Jane's room, Louisa ignored her, but at least she did not eject her. That would have been exceedingly embarrassing.

* * *

All of this displayed Caroline in the best possible light to the one she longed to impress.

Until Miss Elizabeth Bennet arrived.

No sooner had the breakfast dishes been cleared than Eliza Bennet breezed into the room, all sparkling eyes, pert comments, and dirty petticoats. Darcy stood transfixed. Had anyone else bothered to watch him, he would appear the same very proper and rigid Mr. Darcy as he always had, but Caroline Bingley had made Mr. Darcy her life's work — or at least her life's focus for the last two years.

She knew his every gesture, how he preferred his eggs, how he took his tea, and which shops he patronized in both London and Lambton. She was an authority in all things Darcy, and she saw that Miss Elizabeth lit an interest in him that he had never before shown. She had not even thought him capable of that sort of response.

For over two years Caroline had put herself forward, changed her manner of speaking, her fashion, her hair, even blunted her very manner of being in the world to better suit the serious and staid Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy of Pemberley and Derbyshire.

She watched as Darcy's fascination with *Ill-iza* grew. His eyes followed her everywhere. He positively stared at her, sometimes directly and sometimes while he pretended to gaze out the window, just so he could look upon her reflection in its mirrored surface.

Caroline concocted new strategies to gain his attention.

She tried to engage him in conversation about household staff, but was met with monosyllables. She complimented his estate, his intelligence, even his ridiculously even handwriting, all to no avail. The only time she secured his notice was when she invited his favorite fine eyed female for a turn about the room. And then Eliza Bennet had the audacity, the impudence, the absolute cheek to insult her.

Oh, it was cleverly done. She would readily admit that Eliza Bennet was clever, barbarously so. She delighted in turning her opponent's words against him.

Caroline was used to being thought the clever one. In the ballroom she was the one with the witty repartee and was famous in the drawing room for the freshest on-dit — though she was no common gossip. It was likely the only reason her company was sought after at all in London and elsewhere. That and her family's

friendship with the Darcys.

In Miss Elizabeth Bennet, however, she had more than met her match. Eliza made her look tongue-tied at best and dreadfully backward-thinking at worst. Like a puppet-master pulling all of her strings, Eliza excelled at making Caroline contradict her own statements within minutes of uttering them.

She did so just last night, with all her sly discussion of what makes an accomplished lady. This, of course, never happened when it was just the two of them. Silence reined until there was an audience.

If Mr. Darcy walked into the room, Eliza brought out the linguistic daggers. Caroline watched helplessly as the glow of admiration lit his dull, perfidious eyes.

She got all twisted around. Within the span of a minute, that Elizabeth Bennet walked her into saying she knew no more than six truly accomplished women, and then somehow tricked into most shrilly expanding that she was acquainted with many such women. Not five, not seven. Many.

Oh, but that burned deep. She had made Caroline seem so stupid.

And then Darcy quietly, awkwardly offered up that bit of flattery about improving one's mind through reading as Miss Eliza sat clutching the very book that Caroline had been asking Darcy about earlier that morning.

The only reason Miss Eliza kept her nose in a book was to study her opponents and conjure her next impertinent riposte.

* * *

So Mr. Darcy was smitten. Caroline had seen him take note of her own person on more than one occasion, and had been gratified that she could capture his attention in that particularly manly way. Louisa was wrong when she said that Darcy was immune to all women, but never had she seen him so captivated as he was by this cunning country miss.

Worst of all, that very morning she had been forced to entertain the full compliment of the Bennet brood, minus poor, sickly Jane. They invaded the house en masse, ostensibly to check on Jane's well-being, even though only the Bennet matriarch actually bothered to climb the stairs and peek in on her daughter.

Mr. Darcy visibly winced whenever that harridan of a woman, Mrs. Frances Bennet, opened her tireless mouth. Not only did she eye each rug, curtain, and ornament appraising their worth, but she also had the nerve to insult Mr. Darcy directly, commenting that he thought himself above his new country acquaintances.

Which of course he is.

Then the dreadfully noisy and forward Lydia Bennet insisted that Charles hold a ball. To which he, of course being Charles, agreed. The Bennet brood all swooned, Darcy stood in what she could only assume was absolute annoyance, and she, Caroline Bingley was now committed to entertaining one and all in the community by hosting a ball.

While she had longed to host a ball, none of her aspirations had ever included hosting a ball in Hertfordshire, where the unspoken guest of honor was Jane Bennet. No matter. She would throw the neighborhood a party the likes of which they had never seen. It would be a triumph.

It also meant she could not risk inviting any Town friends to the ball, her first ball. She longed to impress Darcy her own connections, show him that she could manage a houseful of distinguished guests, but subjecting her London set to the likes of Frances and Lydia Bennet? Unimaginable.

One thing was certain — Caroline had enjoyed her fill of Bennets. Elizabeth Bennet most of all. The one bright, shining light in her future was that Miss Eliza insisted that her sister appeared well enough to return to their own home by Saturday or Sunday at the latest. For good measure, Caroline offered her most fervent prayers every night for Jane Bennet's full and immediate recovery.

Stalking Her Prey

“Blanchet, that will do very well, thank you,” Caroline smiled into the mirror at her lady’s maid, stood and took in her complete reflection before departing her chambers. She had taken particular care with her appearance that morning — nothing too fancy, but then even her simplest muslin day gown would outshine any of the dresses Miss Elizabeth had ever worn — and her hair was the picture of simple elegance. Blanchet really did deserve an extra something in the next installment of her wages.

Caroline stepped quickly and lightly down the staircase, and nodded as the insufficient footman opened the door to the smaller, family dining room. He looked surprisingly better in the new livery. The Hursts, the only occupants, sat reading and absently sipping tea.

“Good morning, sister,” said Louisa, and returned to her portion of the news, “Listen to this, Bernie, ‘A certain Miss from Lancashire recently ended all speculation on her making a more permanent connection with the elusive Mr. D, as she was seen in a rather delicate position with Mr. dH, and will either be seen next walking down the aisle with the latter, or on a boat to Ireland.’

“A compromise!” she finished with a wicked smile. “Who would have thought old de Hoghten had it in him to create such a scandal. I suppose there is more than one way to secure a marriage, but I am so happy ours was based on a mutual appreciation rather than such a salacious beginning.”

Caroline stood watching from the buffet as her brother Hurst brought his wife’s hand to his lips and kissed it, quietly speaking words Caroline could not quite make out, which caused her sister snicker loudly. She felt her cheeks flame, and did not know where to sit, so she moved to the far end of the table and made a clatter of placing her tea cup.

“Where are Charles and Mr. Darcy?”

Hurst continued to hold his wife’s hand, and turned to Caroline with a flicker of annoyance, “They were down early and went riding out to inspect a low-lying field, Caroline. But please, join us

for breakfast.”

“Thank you, but I enjoyed a cup of chocolate and a roll in my quarters. I really do not have an appetite. A ride sounds just the thing this morning.” She turned resolutely away from the Hursts. Her mouth pursed in disappointment, she barely registered her sister’s admonishment, “Take a groom and do NOT take any fences!”

She snapped at the footman, “Have my horse saddled immediately. I shall be at the stables in a thrice.”

Blanchet had just finished putting away the last of the gowns her mistress had tried on that morning as Caroline flew into the room, muttering “I will jump when and where I see fit...” and in a louder voice, “Call for some chocolate and a roll, Blanchet. I need to change into a riding habit — the claret one with the military braid — and be quick about it.”



* * *

Not twenty minutes later, Louisa’s fingers stopped mid-chord as she saw her sister streaking across the barren fields on her horse. The train of Caroline’s skirt streamed on the wind behind her, like a standard bearer charging into a battle, but instead of a regiment, she was followed by a lone groom, desperately trying to keep up with the lady of the house. Louisa drew in a sharp breath as she watched her sister jump a rock wall at high speed.

Bernard Hurst had been concentrating more on his wife’s countenance than on truly turning the music sheets for her, and placed a comforting arm about her shoulders, “Well Louisa, at least if she should die, it would be a comfort to know that it was all in pursuit of Pemberley.”

* * *

Caroline expended a great amount of energy on her ride, but failed to track down her quarry. She returned to the house as she had departed it — alone.

After apologizing to Blanchet for her earlier shortness, Caroline took a hot bath and changed back into her earlier look of effortless elegance. She continued her quest, determined to see success. She searched all of the common rooms in the manor, and eventually tracked down Mr. Darcy in the library...along with Miss Elizabeth Bennet.

Miss Elizabeth sat reading quietly before the fire, ignoring her companion who sat staring at her. He did not even bother to turn the occasional page of the forgotten book in his hands.

It was too much.

The door stood open wide, and a footman was in attendance, and though there was no chance of compromise, Caroline burned with desire to break up the cozy tête-à-tête. She entered the library in a fast glide, and stood between Elizabeth and her admirer, breaking his line of site.

“Miss Elizabeth, it seems we have the same excellent idea of enjoying a book by the fire...the perfect plan for such a dreary day. May I join you?”

Elizabeth offered her a faint smile and with raised brow gestured to the empty seat beside her own, “Please do, Miss Bingley. It is cozy setting.”

Caroline shot a pert little smile of her own to the smug Eliza Bennet, then turned her back on Elizabeth completely and stepped toward Darcy who remained sitting by the window.

“One cannot neglect a library in this day and age of remarkable discovery...is that not so Mr. Darcy?”

Darcy appeared engrossed in his reading material and without looking up from the page he had clearly not read, replied, “Hmm, yes, quite so Miss Bingley.”

He missed her eye roll.

“Mr. Darcy?”

No response. “Mr. Darcy,” she repeated more emphatically, gaining his attention.

“Yes, Caroline?”

“Would you assist me in selecting a volume of poetry? I am afraid Charles has yet to expand the collection here at Netherfield, and I am at a loss. Might you suggest something I might enjoy? You are so well-read, I really must rely upon your better judgement to find something appropriate for a lady from amongst these dusty volumes.”

He nodded.

She walked closer still. “What is that book you are reading? Is there, perhaps, a second volume to the set? We could discuss it together later, over tea...” she gave him her most dazzling look.

Darcy glanced behind her at Elizabeth, then looked up at her, and put down his book with a sigh. “This is from my personal collection, and I have yet to finish it. There are other volumes in the set, but unfortunately those volumes reside in my library at Pemberley.”

“Who is the author then? Might we find another work of his on these shelves?” She gave him her most winsome smile.

“While this work is most appropriate for our locale, I believe our Charles Bingley has yet to acquire any Charles Lamb for his own pleasure. You shall not find his writing in this library, aside from the book in my hand.”

Miss Elizabeth abandoned her own book, rose from her chair, and stepped towards them, a pleased smile lighting her face, and began,

“Kindling anew the flames of past desire;
And I shall muse on thee, slow journeying on,
To the green plains of pleasant Hertfordshire.”

To Caroline’s dismay Darcy smiled. A broad, handsome smile. And he looked right through her.

“That is it exactly, Miss Elizabeth. It is as if you pulled the words from my very mind. I am not surprised that you would be familiar with that verse.”

He continued ignoring Caroline altogether and speaking over her to that bluestocking Elizabeth Bennet.

“Although it is not the green season, I find myself likewise affected by the beauty found in your home county.” He smiled

shyly, and as if offering a poetical reply began his own recitation,
“A timid grace sits trembling in her eye,
As loath to meet the rudeness of men's sight,
Yet shedding a delicious lunar light
That steeps in kind oblivious ecstasy
The care-crazed mind, like some still melody:
Speaking most plain the thoughts which do possess
Her gentle sprite: peace, and meek quietness,
And innocent loves, and maiden purity:
A look whereof might heal the cruel smart
Of changed friends, or fortune's wrongs unkind..”

* * *

Miss Elizabeth blushed becomingly, and her eyes crinkled as she smiled back at Mr. Darcy. “You are too kind by half, Mr. Darcy, but I do not believe anyone has ever described me as timid or meek.”

“But surely you have been called graceful?” he grinned.

“Tolerable, perhaps, Mr. Darcy,” Eliza arched a brow at him, and he colored immediately.

For the second time that day, Caroline was discomfited by the energy swirling around her, and watched in some confusion as Eliza Bennet and Fitzwilliam Darcy stood frozen, transfixed, and silent.

It was as if Caroline had evaporated into the ether.

It was awful.

“That is a positively lovely poem! You must see to it that Charles purchases those volumes for his own library, Darcy. I know he relies on your recommendations. Charles Lamb. Who knew?”

She seized Darcy’s arm and dragged him towards the bookshelves.

He peeled her fingers one by one from his arm. “Unfortunately, Miss Bingley, the library here holds only the classics and some dated agricultural tracts. I will certainly put this work of Charles Lamb on your brother’s list. In fact, I promised your brother that we would meet before tea to review his drainage plans for the east field

come spring. If you will excuse me, I do not wish to keep Charles waiting.”

Caroline reached out once more but met only air. “But you have yet to assist me in making a selection.”

Mr. Darcy took two long strides and stood in front of the chair formerly occupied by Miss Elizabeth, and picked up a book resting just under hers from the side table.

“If it is literary conversation over tea you desire, might I suggest beginning the second volume of Miss Elizabeth’s selection,” he stepped back and placed the heavy tome in Caroline’s hands. “Or perhaps you could take turns reading to each other from the book she has already begun. I can vouch that it is an excellent read.”

“I am not at all opposed to the idea, Miss Bingley,” Elizabeth had that clever look again.

“Good. It is settled then. While it is not actually considered poetry, I am sure you will find the dialogue form of Plato’s Republic somewhat...poetic.” He smiled faintly, bowed, and left the two women to fend for themselves.

Fair Thee Well, Bennet Beauties

Caroline was weary. Weary of smiling. Weary of making conversation. Weary of striking her most alluring poses, holding her neck just so to best capture the glow of a candle and display her best expression. All of that had been for naught. No one had paid attention.

Saturday was in its final hours, and Jane and Elizabeth Bennet still walked the thick carpets of Netherfield Hall. Elizabeth Bennet had claimed they would depart that day, but there had been no carriage from Longbourn — the horses were needed in the field. Ha! What a joke that was.

Mrs. Frances Bennet was pathetically obvious in her calculated bid to promote her daughters, and yet her stratagems appeared supremely effective. Charles sat beside the demure Miss Jane all evening until her claim of fatigue forced the sisters to retire to their chambers. Elizabeth assisting her sister with saintly patience.

And Mr. Darcy...Mr. Darcy seemingly avoided all conversation with everyone. He did his best to be standoffish. He kept his nose in that volume of terrible poems all night. Except of course, he was secretly hanging on each word Elizabeth Bennet uttered.

The man was a mystery worthy of Udolpho.

At least he had stopped his broody staring.

* * *

Sunday dawned bright and blue. Today would see dear Jane and Eliza Bennet accompanying the Bingley party to church and then returning to Longbourn in the Bennet carriage.

Free of Bennets!

Caroline was so relieved at the prospect of Elizabeth's removal

that she had given most of the staff the day off and arranged a cold collation for dinner with Mrs. Nicholls. Outwardly if questioned, Caroline would look like a most diligent observer of the Sabbath. Inwardly, she simply relished the idea of taking a tray in her room, and truly relaxing for the first time in nearly a week.

No one appreciated the effort it took to appear cheerful yet serene, fashionable yet modest, witty yet not as clever as a man, and above all agreeable. She longed for a night to herself, a night without adornment, where she could sit in her robes, and eat bread and butter for dinner without any one watching to see if she were appropriately modest and feminine in her appetite and portions.

Cards and Conversation

After ridding Netherfield Hall of the invalid and her snarky sister, it hardly seemed fair that she must once again be positively steeped in Bennets, but that is exactly as Caroline found herself on Monday evening.

At breakfast, Charles declared that he had accepted a casual invitation from Mr. Goulding after services on Sunday for an evening of cards on Monday. Despite protesting against attending such an insipid event, the party from Netherfield squeezed into a carriage and soon arrived at the Goulding's front door.

They entered a quiet foyer, and Caroline felt something like alarm well up within her as she registered the still quiet house, the only noise coming from the man taking their wraps and coats, "Charles!" Caroline hurriedly whispered into her brothers ear, "Are we to be the only guests this evening?"

"Not at all Caroline. I simply told you to be ready an hour earlier than the time Mr. Goulding stated so that we would not arrive embarrassingly late."

Charles's face split into the most self-congratulatory grin, and Caroline narrowed her eyes at him in return as she pushed past him. She shrugged out of her pelisse unassisted, as her companions spilled into the hall. She looked up in time to see Mr. Darcy enter and deliver what looked like a wink. Was that a wink? Surely not. Perhaps he had dust in his eye from the ride in the carriage ride. Why ever would Mr. Darcy wink, and most especially at her brother?

Divested of her warm pelisse, she walked into the sitting room and quickly took measure of the place, looking to claim the most advantageous seat — not too near the fire, yet not anywhere near the door, and one where she could readily be seen as guests arrived.

Small tables and scuffed wooden chairs were set in groupings, ready for players, with the regular furniture placed to the side for those not wishing to join the competition. From a small door, Mr. Goulding entered followed by a servant carrying a tray of refreshments.

His jowly face grew even larger with his smile, “Miss Bingley! Welcome, welcome! We are so pleased to have you join our humble party. Come, enjoy some punch...or you may prefer the negus, if you are chilled from your journey.”

Caroline accepted a small cup of the mulled wine more for comfort than a love of negus, but upon taking a sip found it delightful and warming. Combined with that very jolly greeting, she found herself feeling more disposed to the evening. Mr. Goulding was a caring host.

The rest of the party had shed their garments and exchanged hellos with Mr. Goulding.

Caroline most assiduously sought Darcy’s eye, and made a show of leaving room for him beside her on the chosen settee, but Darcy walked past without so much as a nod and joined Mr. Goulding and Mr. Hurst. Louisa took the spot she had intended for Mr. Darcy and began to speak of which card games she hoped to join and how cold the night was.

Caroline listened with half an ear, tamping down any unfair annoyance with her consolation companion — it was not Louisa’s fault that Mr. Darcy was so difficult. Charles bounded through the doorway and offered his hosts a spirited thanks for the invitation and hospitality. Mr. Goulding had been joined by Mrs. Goulding, whose pink cheeks hinted that she had hurried to join her early arriving guests.

Caroline’s spirits dropped another step as Mrs. Goulding claimed the seat opposite her, effectively cutting off any chance of an evening spent in conversation with Mr. Darcy. Not that she would exactly enjoy conversing all evening with Mr. Darcy, as trying to get him to participate was fatiguing at best, but she did need to watch him closely, and keep his attentions firmly on her own clever words and on her person.

She would not be overlooked for the likes of Eliza Bennet. Eliza might possess those fine eyes, but there was nothing wrong with Caroline’s face. Her nose was thin and elegant, and her visage perfectly symmetrical — not marred by a crooked little smile and crinkled up eyes that always seemed to be laughing about something or other.

As if conjured by her very thoughts, Caroline heard the unmistakable sounds of *La Famille Bennet*, as they arrived. Caroline’s expression betrayed a pain of sorts.

“Are you well, dear?” Mrs. Goulding patted Caroline’s knee.

“I am, Mrs. Goulding, I thank you. It is just...just...”

“You do not need to explain,” Mrs. Goulding replied *sotto voce*, “They can be a bit overwhelming until you get to know them. Have more negus.”

Mrs. Goulding excused herself and rose to greet her neighbors, as if nothing in the world had just happened. And Caroline had a new favorite neighbor.

Louisa also stood and walked beside Mrs. Goulding, ostensibly to offer her hellos to the Bennets. What a traitor, Caroline thought uncharitably, but for once prevented the words or even a snort from escaping.

Then it happened. Her brother and Mr. Darcy turned towards her. She pasted on her brightest smile and moved to the center of the settee. She would not make the same mistake twice — Mr. Darcy would have no choice but to sit beside her this time.

Exuding her most welcoming feminine energy, Caroline tilted her head, the better to see and be seen by Mr. Darcy, as the gentlemen carefully stepped between the card tables. His eyes were glued to the floor as he slowly approached, hands behind his back. He looked so appealing in this almost humble state, so much more approachable.

Closer, closer...The noise of the younger Bennets pierced her consciousness, and her smile wavered for a second as Charles and Darcy reached the grouping of furniture where Caroline perched. She leaned against the back of the settee now, cheeks aching with the effort of holding the bewitching expression.

Look up, you fool! The thought popping into her head unbidden as Mr. Darcy brushed up against the seat cushion. Caroline tilted her head in her most charming manner as Mr. Darcy paused directly in front of her. The toes of his shoes almost touched her own delicate kid slippers, and she held her breath, eyes wide and fixed on Mr. Darcy. She willed him to look up and see her. He had impossibly long, dark eyelashes; they refused to budge.

He stood before her. She had to be the bold one and start, him being the strong and silent type. Not her preference, but no matter. She parted her lips and softly uttered, “Fitzwilliam...”

At the very same moment she spoke his name, three things occurred — Lydia and Catherine Bennet bounced beside Mr. Darcy in an profusion of ribbon and giggles; the unmistakable low laugh

of Elizabeth Bennet carried on the air; and Mr. Darcy's eyes opened wide, seeking the source of that tinkling laugh. He walked past the younger Bennets and Caroline without even a glance.

Caroline deflated against the cushion behind her, leaning her head back against the worn damask, and closed her eyes. She needed a second, maybe two...just a moment to regain her composure, but was denied even this.

She felt herself lifted on a wave as Lydia and Catherine popped down on either side of her, their exuberant bounciness shifting the very air and fabric of the seat beneath her. The cushion dropped to its former height, and Caroline found herself squeezed between Silly One and Silly Two.

She shifted in place as she jerked her skirts free from beneath first one Bennet sister's thigh and then the other's. She looked from one shining face to the other. "Miss Catherine, Miss Lydia. How unanticipated is your company."

"Oh Miss Bingley, we would never miss a card party! It is so fortunate that you are here as I have been dying to hear your views on the length of sleeves this season!" Lydia said as if making an important urgent declaration, "You must absolutely tell Kitty and me about which cuff is best and what trimmings you find most appealing for bonnets. Your slippers are beautiful! However did you keep your toes warm on the ride from Netherfield? I cannot bear cold toes, but I would such elegant shoes would make it all worth the discomfort..."

Lydia spoke rapidly and with the sort of self-satisfaction exclusive to those who have not lived long in society. She would pose a question and move on to her next statement before either Caroline or the quieter young Bennet, Catherine could offer an answer or even agree with the first.

Caroline let the girl's words flow over her, and watched as Mr. Darcy stationed himself just behind where a recovered Jane Bennet the irksome Eliza stood talking with Mrs. Goulding.

She heaved a sigh, as her plans of coquettish triumph disintegrated into nothing like paper in a fire. She begrudgingly shifted her full attention to the girls on either side of her. Lydia's dress was as noisy as its wearer, a riot of ribbons, lace, and color.

Her figure was, Caroline admitted, enviable. Lydia's lush curves matched her out-sized personality, and like her conversation, could hardly be contained. She possessed youthful vigor and youthful

appeal in an impressive abundance.

Lydia's prattle continued, but required no response of Caroline other than a few nods and smiles. She angled towards quiet Catherine, as Lydia did not require anyone's reply at present.

Quiet Catherine's family had bestowed upon her the unfortunate sobriquet "Kitty". Once again, Mrs. Bennet's strategy proved superior as Caroline felt herself soften in response to this Bennet.

It may have been the sweet and entirely disarming association with kittens, or it could have been that Kitty Bennet was just lacking. Lacking in accomplishments certainly — Kitty readily admitted that she played no instrument, possessed no proficiency in the modern languages, and she even sat in such a way that she sort of faded into the settee...but her disadvantage was far more pernicious than the lack of governess given education and poor posture.

Miss Catherine was lacking in a voice. No one every listened to Kitty Bennet. At least as far as Caroline had seen.

Caroline first noticed this lack of consideration at the Meryton assembly Charles had insisted on attending, and her observations had been sadly confirmed in each successive gathering where Bennets were in attendance.

The most attention given to Kitty Bennet by her family was when her mother admonished her not to cough. The cackling Bennet matron would madly rave on and on about the Beguiling Miss Jane Bennet and Lovely Lydia the Lively...but never a word about Catherine. Of course, her sister Lydia did insist that Kitty stuck constantly to her side, but Kitty's most vital role there was to emphasize Lydia's performance.

Then there was Elizabeth the Intelligent. The captivating, witty Lizzy was clearly the apple of her father's eye, and even Moralizing Mary garnered the odd complimentary comment from her father. At least that was something.

By comparison, Catherine was a shadow, a mirror to reflect her brightly glowing sisters light. She lacked confidence. It was evident in her air and manner of walking.

Caroline fully shifted to view Kitty's whole person. She was not unattractive. While she lacked the angelic coloring and demeanor of the unfairly exquisite Jane, the thick curls and...well, the thick curls of Elizabeth, the upright carriage and near accomplishments of Mary, and the shapely proportions of loud Lydia, Miss Kitty Bennet

did possess at least one quality all the other Bennet's lacked — an eye for fashion.

Though her hunchiness did her no favors, Kitty wore her clothing well. The colors she chose complemented her complexion, her gowns were neither excessively adorned nor overly plain, and the cut of her gowns fashioned in such a way as to make the most of her assets — clever darts and stitches to conceal or enhance — techniques Caroline's own talented Blanchet employed.

"...and you simply **MUST** tell me what necklines are preferred this season in London. I am just **DYING** for a new ballgown in the Greek style but in pale blue and with a very low cut neckline, but mamma says I must wear white and add lace to the neck..." Lydia continued on without seeming to need to breathe.

Caroline chanced a look over at where Mr. Darcy stood, and to her dismay saw him reach out as if to stroke an errant curl of Miss Elizabeth's. He pulled his hand back abruptly as if he had touched a searing flame, but there it was. Dignified Mr. Darcy had almost committed a most grievous social sin. The expression on his face was one of disbelief, and he stood flexing that very disgraceful hand beside his athletic thigh, as if exerting his will over a stubborn body part.

It was simply too much.

Caroline turned her back to Mr. Darcy and his straying appendage. She sucked in her cheeks and cut Lydia off mid-sentence. "You! Miss Lydia Bennet. Cease your endless chatter and take a breath. I insist. You will sit quietly for a full two minutes at least."

Lydia's mouth gaped. She looked frozen in place, unable or unwilling to believe Miss Bingley had spoken to her in such a severe manner.

Caroline closed her eyes and breathed in and breathed out, opened her eyes and stood, "Miss Lydia, take my place in the middle." The girls looked like perfect bookends with their mouths was open in matching little moues of incredulity. They sat still and blessedly quiet. Caroline sighed, "Move, girl!"

Lydia scrambled over to the center of the settee beside Kitty, pulling her skirts in tight, her look of shock giving way to temper. Caroline took Lydia's place at the end and turned to face both girls. Kitty sat dumbfounded, but Caroline watched as Lydia screwed herself up in preparation to make her feelings known.

Before she erupted, Caroline took Lydia's hand in her own and squeezed. "Please. No words. Not yet." She squeezed her eyes shut and listened to the buzz of newcomers and conversation going on all around them, but at their small grouping of furniture, on the settee not too near the fire, yet not close to the door, there was not a sound.

She opened her eyes and found Lydia Bennet staring through slitted eyes while Kitty looked like she had found the bean in her serving of Christmas pudding.

"First, I apologize for my snappish remarks..."

Lydia snorted and crossed her arms.

"But Miss Lydia you are liking a cricket player who refuses to give up the bat. You must occasionally let another player have his turn."

Lydia sniffed, "I have never played cricket. Nor have I ever watched cricket being played. I have no idea what you are talking about."

"No, I suppose you have not. Well, then, to put it another way, you cannot always hold court, even if you are like a princess," Caroline softened her tone, "Even princesses must at times listen to their subjects and heed the commands of their queen."

Lydia kept her head turned away, but Caroline could see the corners of the girl's mouth quirk up at that. "You would be the queen?"

"I am."

"Then that makes me the princess," Lydia turned back to face her. "But queens are supposed to behave well at all times. You spoke so harshly to us, in a manner not at all befitting a queen," Lydia gave her a slanted eyed stare.

Caroline looked at her hands, "You are right. I was rude...a queen should be more circumspect in her behavior." She held a finger to her lips to forestall Lydia's next comment, "But a princess cannot carry on so. Especially if she wants to make a positive impression on the court at large and on any princes who might be in the area."

Lydia smiled slightly, warming to the game.

Caroline looked over Lydia's shoulder at Kitty. "And you, Princess Catherine...you must make your voice heard, speak your own mind. Your people must know your thoughts. A successful princess must be well-informed, she must be strong, and she must

know her own mind well enough to convey her very important thoughts and ideas to those around her.”

She looked back at Lydia, “That goes for both of you.”

The girls looked thoughtful.

“Look around you. Do you see how your sisters are holding court? They command the attention of all of the eligible princes in the room at present.”

Kitty and Lydia turned to see a strange grouping of circles of mostly men milling around both Elizabeth and Jane. The Lucas boys spoke with Elizabeth along with their sister Charlotte, with Mr. Darcy floating at edge of the sphere, while Jane entertained Charles, Mr. Goulding, and two uniformed militiamen newly arrived at the party.

“That is because Jane is the most beautiful and Lizzy is so clever,” breathed Kitty longingly.

“I will admit that dear Jane is the picture of English beauty... and even that your sister Eliza is clever,” Caroline shook her head and looked back to Kitty with an expression full of kindness, “but you are beautiful too. And you are very clever with your fashion. You are as well put together as any London miss in her first season.”

A becoming glow stole across Kitty’s face at hearing these compliments from the still-new and much admired Miss Bingley.

Lydia sulked, “Then why are they surrounded by all of the men while we sit by ourselves. Jane always gets all of the attention.”

“Now Miss Lydia, you must also see that in addition to good looks, your eldest sister possesses an air of serenity, which lends her an air of intelligence...and dare I say wisdom. We know that Jane is intelligent, of course, but these men do not. They are simply basing their judgements on her outer appearance and more importantly, on her behavior.”

Lydia looked skeptical and turned longingly towards the entrance, where two more officers of the -shire Militia had arrived.

Caroline pitched her voice to almost a whisper, “Oh very well. I will say it plainly, but if you want me to speak about things best left until you are older, then you had better pay me heed.”

This garnered the full attention of both Kitty and Lydia. “Men think that girls who frolic noisily about, who flirt openly, and display their...natural attributes so prominently...they...well...”

“Tell us already!” Lydia said too loudly in gleeful expectation

and found herself hushed by both Miss Bingley and Kitty. Being hushed by her older but typically easily led sister was a novel experience for Lydia, and she stilled her fidgeting.

Caroline looked at the youngest Bennet knowingly. "What you want to hear...what you think I will tell you, is that gentlemen find those rather forward ladies irresistible. That those behaviors achieve great success during a season...am I correct in my assumptions?"

Caroline cocked an eyebrow at the girls, who in turn nodded eagerly.

"Everyone knows that is the fastest way to secure a husband," Lydia replied with an eye-roll designed to communicate to Caroline that her revelations were anything but informative.

Lydia, for her conceit, earned a pinch from Kitty.

"Ow! That hurt."

Kitty shushed her.

"No. I see I was wrong in attempting to take you into my confidence, Miss Lydia. I have nothing to tell that you have not already heard." Caroline peered over Lydia's shoulder at Kitty. "Miss Kitty, would you care to partake of a bit of punch and retire to those seats across the room to continue our discussion?"

Caroline smiled warmly, and to her own surprise, genuinely at Kitty, even as she intentionally baited the young Lydia.

"No! I mean, please do not leave me, Miss Bingley," Lydia exclaimed looking somewhat abashed, "I am truly sorry for not listening. It is just that I know that men like...to be flirted with that is," she smiled as she warmed to her subject. "They tell me I am ever so pretty, and always compliment me on the cut of my gowns and my high spirits."

This confession immediately created wrinkle of apprehension on Miss Bingley's brow and in the pit of her stomach, "And when do you receive such compliments from men, Miss Lydia?"

"Well," Lydia leaned forward as if sharing a great secret, "At the last assembly, Denny told me to meet him the next day in Meryton at the—"

"Please do not tell me you agreed to such a scheme," Caroline screwed her eyes shut, "Lydia Bennet, if you give in so easily, if you are so willing to even give the appearance of possessing low moral standards, I will simply not continue our acquaintance."

"But I—"

“No. There are no excuses. A proper young lady does not make plans to meet a soldier, not any man. Ever. Unless that man is her father or brother, or some dear relative. What were you thinking?”

Lydia looked perplexed.

“But Mamma says there is nothing wr—”

“Offer me one more justification, and I drop you like a stone,” Caroline tilted her head forward and raised an eyebrow.

“Good girl. A lady, especially a lady of little means has only her reputation, her looks, and her wit to recommend her. In that order. No man wants to take a wife of questionable virtue. Keep meeting officers on the sly and flirting outrageously, and you will never find a worthy man.”

Kitty shrunk a little as Lydia drew herself up, “Well I never!”

“Yes, Miss Lydia, you may have never, but I bet you five pounds that all of the officers of the -shire Militia believe that you would!”

Lydia’s mouth opened and closed like a fish drying up on a riverbank. Kitty’s eyes popped wider still, and Caroline waited, arms crossed, tongue in cheek, thoroughly pleased with silent tumult she had wrought.

“You...you’re horrible!” Lydia hissed as Kitty leaned forward as if to smother her sister’s voice with her body.

“A little too close to the mark for you? I tell you nothing but the truth. If you want to end up living in squalor with a crying babe on your hip, stale bread in the larder, and an impoverished soldier in a ratty red coat on your arm, do stay the course, Lydia Bennet. If, on the other hand, you are ready for the chance to raise your circumstance, to have a taste of London society, to meet a man who can buy you more than sprigged muslin and straw bonnets, then I invite you to call upon me tomorrow afternoon for tea. Tea and lessons. On how to comport yourselves like ladies. And just the two of you. Lord knows I do not have the patience to reform all of the Bennet brood at once.”

With that Caroline stood and walked briskly to where her sister and Mrs. Goulding sat, without so much as a backward glance at Lydia and Kitty. She felt good for the first time all day. She had a new project. Caroline adored projects.

A Letter to Richard

*Netherfield Hall, Hertfordshire
Sunday, 17 November, 1811*

* * *

Dear Richard,

It was with great joy that I received your most recent letter — I was unaware of your return to British soil, and I thank God that it is so! Georgiana and I had hoped to see you leading the parade with the Foot Guards at the victory celebration in Whitehall back in May, but that was just the wishful thinking of the heart. Though the presence of calvary — what with your powerful steeds and shining uniforms would have decidedly elevated the event.

I had understood from your father that following your recovery, your presence was still required on the Peninsula for some time — I am deeply gratified to have you returned from the campaign relatively unscathed.

My sincere apologies for my delayed reply to your welcome news, but your letter reached me not at Pemberley, as you had surmised, but instead in a packet of correspondence forwarded to me by my steward.

You shall find me at Netherfield Hall in Hertfordshire, the recent home of my friend Charles Bingley. My presence here was specifically requested by Bingley, as he intends to finally purchase an estate and sought my opinion of the property. I anticipate staying until the holiday season, when I will join Georgiana for our celebration at Pemberley.

Hertfordshire is no Derbyshire, but Bingley could do worse.

You will be unsurprised to hear that Charles has already established himself with his neighbors as the most amiable gentleman of their acquaintance, and has his sisters planning a ball to further ingratiate

himself with the natives. He has even found a local “angel” upon whom to fix his attentions.

She is like most of his angels, in that she is beautiful, blond, and blue-eyed. Miss Bennet differs from the others, however, in that I find she is also blessed with a kind disposition and a natural and most becoming modesty. I will not share that opinion with Bingley, however, as he needs little encouragement to forward his interest, and would be better served to moderate his enthusiasm for this dower-less country miss.

Miss Bennet has recently returned to her own home of Longbourn, after suffering a brief bout of illness while visiting with Bingley’s sisters. Her indisposition required her continued presence at Netherfield Hall, and we were visited by another of the Bennets, her sister, a Miss Elizabeth Bennet, who came to nurse the aforementioned “angel” back to good health.

Miss Elizabeth shares her sister’s warmth and gentleness, but do not be fooled by her common kindnesses — the woman possesses a keen eye and a rapier wit. I have enjoyed several instances of verbal competition with her, and find her ability to speak on and challenge my views refreshing. She is not like so many fawning females of our acquaintance, who assume I value deference over intelligence. She can speak equally on politics and dances, philosophy and shoe roses. A most refreshing change.

In addition to being keen, her eyes are also remarkably fine, full of sparkle and fire. They do serve to betray her otherwise respectable outward demeanor, as her eyes reveal the delight she takes in the absurdities of our company.

The Miss Bennets’ mother, one of those absurdities, is the worst sort of match-making mamma. As captivating as her two eldest daughters are, the mother is equally repellent.

Her mouth cannot open with emitting a shriek or offering offense. I fear that the elder Miss Bennet would be hard pressed to decline any offer from poor Bingley, regardless of her true feeling, which I suspect do not favor his suit. She smiles too much, at all and sundry, and is far too demure to believe that her heart has been genuinely engaged. It would be quite an unequal pairing, which saddens me. Bingley’s heart is quite engaged.

On a brighter note, Georgiana continues at Pemberley with her companion, Mrs. Annesley. Mrs. Annesley has proven a God-send, as she continues to encourage Georgiana in her efforts to reclaim society

and contributes to my sister's recovery. You will find Georgie much altered from her experience in Ramsgate, but I beg of you to hold your comments and avoid discussing that blackguard's betrayal. I am considering bringing Georgiana here to Netherfield, as I believe that she too would find Miss Elizabeth's lively company a refreshing balm to her troubled heart, but then she would also be forced into company with Miss Caroline Bingley. I have yet to decide if making the acquaintance of the one outweighs the pain brought by daily contact with the other — it is a conundrum which as yet remains unsolved.

You have not made the acquaintance of Bingley's sisters.

Upon initial meeting, I found them to be rather fine females — well educated, fashionable, and blessed with most attractive looks.

After a time, however, they do bring to mind a mythological text by the poet Hesiod — “Harpies of the lovely hair, winged women soaring aloft like birds.” Both are possessed of that sort of porcelain look, all airy thinness and piercing eyes...

The eldest, Mrs. Louisa Hurst is harmless enough, I suppose, and you may recall meeting her a few years back when Bernard Hurst was courting her just after Bingley, Hurst, and I left Cambridge. She can, at times, tend towards undue criticism, but I believe that is a subject greatly emphasized at those fine seminary schools — all the more reason to keep Georgiana at home, studying with the masters than send her off to some coveted boarding school. But I digress.

Louisa Hurst's only true fault lies in humoring her younger sister rather than exerting herself on her sister's behalf. Caroline, the youngest Bingley, is a sister who desperately requires some exertion...from some quarter.

In contrast to Louisa Hurst's generally benign nature, young Caroline is most definitely a harpy of the Homeric, storm winds variety. One could readily believe her an executor of vengeance for the gods — swift moving, pale face full of hunger, snatching up offending parties with sharp claws...she is terrifying. Willful, cool, and unrelenting.

When not blundering about these wilds with Charles, I spend my time escaping the grasping clutches of Miss Caroline. She is rather bold in her pursuit, and a decent tactician. Her actions are all designed to earn either my approval or my attention when we are in the same room. Like so many ladies, she sees naught but Pemberley reflected in my eyes.

But here I am and here I remain. At least for the time being. Running away from one lady...forced out into uncomfortable, unfamiliar company on an almost daily basis...Bingley says it is good for me, and

though I would never admit this to him, perhaps he is right. In truth, I have felt somewhat lighter surrounded by all this activity. It has kept me from reflecting overmuch upon my own recent failures at home. And just so you do not imagine anything more dire, yes, I am referring to failing to protect Georgie and almost losing her to that feckless, flea-bitten, bag of feces.

I have promised Bingley to continue in Hertfordshire at least through November, as he has set the date for his Savage Dance for the 25th of this month. Would he not resent me for leaving his sisters without an acceptable dance partner at his ball, I would gladly join you this very evening for a good French brandy, and a recounting of your time spent among fine Spanish ladies.

As it is, you must avail yourself of the comforts of Darcy House and the contents of my cellar.

Zounds! If greater example of my regard for you exists, I know it not! In truth, Fitzwilliam, receiving word from your very hand of your safe keeping has brightened my spirits, and unburdened my soul.

I am uncommonly thankful for your return.

Your servant,

Darcy

* * *

*Netherfield Hall, Hertfordshire
Tuesday, 19 November, 1811*

* * *

Fitz, forgive me for appearing the worst sort of selfish ass, as you will surely receive this brief note by courier first, but understand that you

shall also shortly receive an earlier letter by regular post which expresses my veriest joy in your return.

That degenerate...that perverse, villainous bag of guts, George Wickham, has found his way to Meryton in Hertfordshire, of all places...and I swear to God above, if I do not share these feelings with another, I will beat him dead with my own two hands.

Bingley and I rode into the small market town of Meryton today, on our way to the neighboring estate of Longhorn to inquire after Miss Bennet's health, when we spied those self-same Bennets outside the local milliners. As I reigned up my horse, I confess that I was wholly distracted by a fine pair of eyes, but as I glanced to my side, I found myself looking into the face of that flesh-mongering bastard.

He blanched in cowardly fashion, but then the whelp had the impudence to doff his hat to me. As if I would acknowledge him as a gentleman! Blinded by fury, I wheeled my horse around and rode him too hard back to Netherfield, where I find myself clutching a bottle in one hand and this quill in the other.

There is now no question of bringing Georgiana into this stew of country manners.

Apparently Wickham has joined the -shire Militia which winters in Meryton. Do I call him out and finally give him his due? My concerns for the families and merchants here is only out-weighed by my need for discretion. And I am left choking on the better part of valor.

Darcy

Pangs of Disappointed "Love"

Sunday was a good day, spent indulging herself in her quarters.

Monday was spent playing cards at the Gouldings and finishing invitations to Lydia Bennet's Ball. At least that is what Caroline had begun to call it in her head. It was formerly called Charles Bingley's Ball, but since he insisted that Lydia name the date, it had become her ball. Which was just fine, as Caroline did not care to own it. Too provincial.

Tuesday had proven terrible and boring at all the same time. Just like Hertfordshire, regardless of what that poet Charles Lamb had written about the county. What did he know anyway?

* * *

Late Tuesday morning, Darcy and her brother rode out to call upon the Bennets, for Charles to call upon Jane, really. As much as Caroline was loathe to allow Mr. Darcy time to gaze upon his dear Eliza, she was even more disinclined to offer her compliments to the Bennet family in the form of her calling upon them in person. She could just imagine the pain of being forced to sit with that tabby Frances Bennet for above fifteen minutes time, making polite conversation, while enduring the shrieks and yowls from her litter of kittens. Which was to say Lydia Bennet.

No thank you.

Hurst and Louisa were no where to be found.

So it was that Caroline sat alone in the drawing room, completing the last of the invitations, when a bit of commotion in the house announced the return of the gentlemen.

A satisfied and rather large grin spread across Caroline's face. The gentlemen had returned home early from their calls. Caroline

hoped the slamming doors and quick footsteps indicated that either or both of them had met with some sort of disappointment at Longbourn.

Of course Longbourn would be disappointing, how could it help but disappoint, being the home of that dreadful family, but for Darcy to slam a door and be short with a servant meant something much more dire had occurred than the headache of sitting with silly females for a quarter hour's time. He was seriously displeased.

Thrilling!

Had Eliza Bennet or her odious family offended the most worthy man in all of Hertfordshire? In all of England! Ha!

Caroline was standing before Mr. Nicholls could even open the doors to the drawing room. To her dismay, a wave of squealing giggles reached her before Nicholls solemnly announced, "Miss Catherine Bennet and Miss Lydia Bennet," before shutting the doors. Caroline leaned then tilted her neck in an effort to see past Nicholls as he closed the doors, hoping to glimpse either Mr. Darcy or her brother. But there was only Bennet girls, as the sisters rushed into the room to stand in front of the sofa nearest her own.

Kitty dropped into a passable curtsy, as Lydia offered an exaggerated obeisance, "My *queen*."

Miss Catherine whipped her head around, "Stop that nonsense. Miss...Miss Bingley, we saw your brother in Meryton with Mr. Darcy, and we recalled your kind invitation and thought it would be best to follow him back to Netherfield to pay our respects."

Lydia snorted. "La Kitty, it is not as if Miss Bingley is a real queen even with all those airs she puts on—"

Kitty pinched her sister hard on the arm.

"Ow!"

The sisters stood toe to toe, mirrored murderous expressions on their faces, though if Caroline were betting, Lydia's height gave her a slight advantage.

"You said you would behave!"

"I am behaving! Don't pinch!"

"Girls," Caroline interjected before Kitty could pinch Lydia again, "please do sit. Let me call for refreshments."

Caroline grasped each of their hands and simultaneously pulled them down to sit on the sofa behind them.

She swept past them to the pull and was gratified when the door opened to admit a maid before Caroline could reclaim her seat.

“Tea and something delightful to sweeten our guests, please.” She smiled tightly and stood for a moment longer, as the maid quietly exited. She squeezed her eyes shut, counted to ten, then turned to her guests.

Kitty and Lydia smiled up at her, looking for all their years like eager little girls awaiting a candy. Lydia, apparently not made for long grudges, spoke first, “At the Goulding’s last night you said you would teach us a better way to flirt.”

“I said no such thing!”

“You did.”

Caroline recited a verse under her breath, “Needles and pins, needles and pins, when a woman marries her trouble begins.”

“It is man, not woman,” Lydia looked pleased with herself, “Everyone knows that.”

“Did I say that aloud?” Caroline asked incredulously.

“You did. And you did get it wrong. When a man marries his trouble begins,” Lydia replied.

Caroline looked at the girl for a long moment. “How many happily married couples do you know, Miss Lydia?”

Pause.

“And you, Miss Catherine?” She looked at Kitty. “Of all the couples in the area, I believe your mother said four-and-twenty families, how many of those married men and women are perfectly, sublimely in love?”

Twin furrowed brows looked up at her. “And your mother? Does Mrs. Bennet express blissfully contentment with her lot? Does your father shower her with affection, surprise her with thoughtful little presents? Does he, after so many years of marriage, help her into and out of the carriage or does he allow a footman to provide those services? Is he attentive to her needs?”

The girls exchanged uncomfortable glances. Caroline had her answer.

“I am afraid, my dear Miss Catherine and Miss Lydia, that a woman finds more trouble in marriage than does a man.” The maid entered with a tea tray and the room went quiet.

Caroline poured tea for the three of them, adding the perfect amount of sugar to each girl’s cup and milk to Kitty’s.

She sat back with her own cup, took a sip, and stared at the preternaturally quiet pair. “That will serve as lesson one. Choose your partner with great care. You have but one husband and to him

you shall be tied for eternity. Now, who would like an Eccles cake? They are really remarkably flaky, though I prefer cook's biscuits."

Lydia took a biscuit from the proffered plate and snapped off a smile bite, chewing very slowly. Kitty followed suit. Their wheels were turning.

* * *

Caroline stayed in the drawing room after the young Miss Bennets had departed. She was surprised to find that she had enjoyed their visit. It was not often that one could speak her mind so directly, but something about Miss Lydia's loudness invited that sort of communication.

It was rather refreshing. Improper to be sure, but it reminded her of who she was before she was sent to Miss Ryall's.

A little untamed. Just a little wild.

Another hour passed as Caroline returned her attention to the invitations. The doors opened as she sanded the last paper, and Darcy's valet, Greaves, appeared before her, asking for an express rider and informing her that Mr. Darcy would require a tray in his quarters for tea this afternoon, as he was indisposed and would not be joining the family.

She met his request with silence, and employed that device Eliza Bennet was so fond of — the raised eyebrow. The valet stood his ground, and neither divulged further information about his master nor handed over the letter held in his hand. Presumably the letter that was so urgent it required immediate delivery, and by one of her grooms, not a hired rider. He met her silence with cool eyes and an expressionless face. Butler face. They all had it.

"Very well," she huffed, and rang for a maid. She instructed the girl to call for her own groom, as not only was he a fast and skilled horseman, but she could also then question him later about where and to whom he delivered Darcy's important message.

When her groom appeared, the valet bowed to Caroline and thanked her for fulfilling Mr. Darcy's needs so graciously and well.

Greaves then withdrew with the young man to the quiet of the hall, and Caroline watched closely as the man handed her groom the sealed letter and several coins. At least she would not be required to dip into the household budget to compensate the young man for his additional time and effort. He dashed out the door, eager to be of use and, she surmised, eager to have his share of adventure. Who could blame him?

Darcy's valet turned his phlegmatic stare back to her, bowed respectfully, and retreated above stairs. The cheek! So collected and dutiful, yet he clearly conveyed a message in his restrained civility.

Not for her.

Not his service, not the information with which he had been entrusted, and most definitely not his master. Not for the likes of Caroline Bingley, Daughter of Trade. Greaves would be the first one dismissed when she was Mistress of Pemberley. To be closely followed by that bastion of grit, Mrs. Reynolds.

Both had been in service of the Darcy family for years. Both had perfected that distinctive bearing of long-entrenched staff — that of providing impeccable service while simultaneously conveying their total disapproval. Caroline's fortune might be too shiny and new for the likes of Reynolds and Greaves, but she bowed and scraped to no one.

She sealed the last invitation, then rang for Nicholls. If the temperamental Mr. Darcy had taken tea in his rooms, so would the rest of them. Who knew where anyone was in that drafty old house anyway?

* * *

Dinner that night was a subdued affair. She counted the number of words Darcy said. Eleven

thank you...yes...no thank you...yes, of course...thank you. And Charles and the Hursts were little better. She and Charles discussed Lydia's Ball — did he have any further invitations for her to write, yes there would be white soup enough, no she had not sent the

Bennet's invitation and yes, she understood that his intention was to deliver some of the invitations in person as he wanted to make a good impression upon his new friends...and so on, and so on... monotonous, stupefying, dull.

It was the same conversation he had held with her the previous night after they had returned from the card party. He did not comment on her newest hair style — thank you, Blanchet, you are a gem — nor would he discuss the earlier tumult when Darcy and he had returned from their visit. She hinted at it once or twice, but was met with tight lips from her brother and a grim look from Mr. Darcy.

Louisa sat shifting her bracelets in the candlelight, making patterns on the table linen, and Hurst appeared to be falling asleep at the table. Dinner was obviously best kept brief, and no one objected when she declined the dessert course.

The gentlemen appeared in the drawing room almost as soon as the tea service was brought in, providing her no opportunity to ask Louisa if she was aware of what had so disquieted Darcy. Everyone accepted their cups from her and retreated into their own thoughts, leaving Caroline to sit frustrated and fuming.

* * *

Charles and Darcy drained their tea, and quickly disappeared to the billiard room for a brandy, or who knows what, and only the Hursts and Caroline remained. Caroline abandoned her cup, and moved to the keyboard, and after leafing through music sheets for a time, chose to play some soothing nocturnes.

She lost herself in the music for some time, and as the last note still vibrated in the air, Louisa walked to the bench and kissed Caroline's head.

"You have such a remarkable touch, my dear. Thank you for gifting us with such calming sounds. I believe I prefer these unassuming performances here at home to those complex pieces of fireworks you choose when you are asked to perform before a larger

audience.”

“Yes, but you are my loving sister whose praise comes from the heart. Those larger audiences look and listen to find fault as much as enjoyment. I could never play something so simple in public or I would be accused of lacking proficiency...but I thank you for your compliment nonetheless,” Caroline replied with a genuine smile.

“You have a point. I cannot argue against your reasoning, but if they knew what they were missing, they would be sorry.”

Hurst joined the sisters and took his wife’s arm, “Come Louisa, were you not just claiming fatigue? Let us retire.” He took his wife’s hand, and nodded to Caroline seated at the bench, “Lovely performance, Caroline. It has been some time since I have enjoyed a recital so well.”

Caroline watched their departing figures and was surprised to see Bernard Hurst tenderly pull her sister close against his side while leaving his hand shockingly low on her waist. In response Louisa threaded her own arm around his waist and kissed his jacketed shoulder.

That Mr. Hurst chose to sit and listen to her play instead of choosing more drink with the men was surprising enough. That he affectionately led his wife above stairs was, in her experience, unprecedented, bordering on shocking.

She felt slightly embarrassed, as if she had been caught peeping. It was awkward and yet she could not look away as they slowly walked out the doors and into the hall — their forms seemingly molded to one another like puzzle pieces.

She had not been privy to such behavior from her brother and sister Hurst. In Town, he frequently kept late hours playing cards at his club, and Louisa was more often than not left at home in Caroline’s sole care and company. It was not as if the Hursts were ever adversarial by any means, but neither would she ever have described them as an affectionate couple.

What was it about being in Hertfordshire that so altered people?

Caroline shook her head and turned back to the pianoforte. She selected a rather melancholy piece by Beethoven, which only served to heighten her sense of disquiet. She lost interest in the exercise altogether, rose from her place at the pianoforte and headed to the billiard room.

Her satin slippers padded silently on the soft carpets down the hallway, following the sound of voices, seeking some company to

help dispel all of her unsettled feelings.

She heard laughter and then the crack of a cue striking a ball, and was about to enter the room, but was brought up short when Darcy said her name. She froze in place, hand gripping the knob, door slightly ajar. She peered into the the bright room from the dark hallway.

“Caroline is more determined than ever to capture my attention, Charles. I thought you were to speak with her about her behavior.”

Caroline’s eyes widened.

“I am sorry my friend — I confess that I have not yet held that conversation, but you see how she is. The more I discourage her, the stronger her resolve to have you. It has always been so. She bounced from school to school, causing trouble and questioning everything she was told until Uncle finally found a place for her far away in Weymouth with a Miss Ryall. She was a god-send. Deserves sainthood.”

They laughed.

“No one else has ever made such an impression on my sister. I certainly cannot control her.”

“You must find a way to check her, Charles. You know that I speak to you from the heart. I am not worried for my own self...I have fended off the advances of far more aggressive admirers...but I worry for your own standing and reputation. You are as a brother to me, and everyone who meets you is a friend...”

“And all who meet my sister find her jeering condescension off-putting and unsavory,” Bingley sighed. “I know Darcy, I know. It is the chief reason I sought such a remote estate. I would much rather settle near your Pemberley in Derbyshire, but heaven knows I could not subject your uncle, the Earl, to Caroline’s antics. There is no one here in this area of the world to offend. At least no one who has the political capital to withhold vouchers to Almack’s.”

Caroline watched Darcy wince and her brother redden. “I am sorry that Count Lieven snubbed you. He is an ass, and his Countess, well...to steal words from one more brilliant than I, the tartness of her face sours ripe grapes.”

Darcy smiled, but it was tinged with sadness, “If anything, I would have thought that Countess Dorothea would have found a kindred spirit in Caroline — they are equally haughty and demanding. Perhaps she felt your sister was overshadowing her. There is, after all, only enough space in a ballroom for one

principal, and supercilious though Caroline may be, unattractive she is most certainly not; Countess Lieven could have perhaps overlooked Caroline's slight if she garnered less attention. Your sister does tend to draw attention when she enters a room."

Her stomach dropped. Countess Lieven — darling doyenne of the ton. The lady she accidentally-intentionally dropped a glass of negus on at the last ball of the season. Horrible, spiteful woman! She richly deserved the ruined gown. She had pushed her empty glass into Caroline's hands and commanded her to be sure to scrub it until it shined, *Shop Girl*.

And, as if that were not insulting enough, she then turned her back on Caroline, effectively pushing her out of the circle of ladies with whom she had been standing. All because Caroline has happened to mention that she was invited to attend a house party at Pemberley as a particular guest of Darcy's. Wretched, wretched woman!

Charles leaned heavily on his cue, hanging his head, and Caroline had to struggle to hear. "I do not mind so much that the Countess threatened to have her friends at Almack's ban all of us Bingley's from entry next season. In fact, I received so many consolation invitations from people with whom I am not acquainted just because they do not like the Lievens and enjoyed hearing of Caroline's antics, that it more than made up for the public dressing down."

Charles slowly chalked his cue, "As you can surmise, my chief concern is what this all means for Caroline's prospects this coming season. She has been out now for two and a half seasons. Two and a half, and not a single offer."

Darcy whistled lowly. "Not a one?"

Caroline felt her cheeks burn to hear her prospects bandied about so openly, and nearly jumped in to contradict her brother.

"Not one that I would entertain. I do not wish to see her married to some mercenary who would wager her fortune on a card game. Nor do I wish to consign her to an old man looking for a pretty, young brood mare to provide him with his heir and a spare.

Charles took his shot, but did not hit his mark. "Or worst of all, a rake who needs to take a virginal maiden as a bride to appease his disgusted father. She deserves better than that..."

"Come Charles, there must be someone you could encourage to meet her at the altar. She is, on paper, imminently attractive. Her

face is perfectly symmetrical, and if she were to use it to convey genuine emotion, could be considered beautiful...

An indignant huff rolled up and out of Caroline's mouth, and she clamped a hand over her own mouth to stop herself from revealing her position.

"Her figure is pleasing, although a bit lean..." Darcy paused and chalked his cue.

She bit her tongue to keep from issuing a caustic rejoinder.

"And lately has even looked astonishingly elegant. She seems to have put aside her obsession with feathers and shiny objects."

He leaned over the table and lined up his shot. She narrowed her eyes at Darcy from her shadowy position at the door.

"And of course, you could simply find someone in need of a monetary infusion. There are plenty of young bucks set to inherit run down estates or second sons whose need for ready cash outweighs their need for peace at home," Darcy struck his target with some force, and the balls made a satisfying clacking sound.

Both men laughed, although whether at Caroline's expense or at the result of their mediocre shots on the table was in question.

"Would that it were it so easy, Darcy. I would be enjoying my own peace here at Netherfield Hall, rather than hiding out in this billiard room with you. Perhaps I should search farther afield."

"Only if you think it possible that her reputation has not preceded her." Darcy leaned over the table and took another shot.

Her brother countered with his own, then said, "Perhaps a third son in Ireland?"

Darcy snickered, "Maybe a convict in the former Colonies?"

Caroline executed a quick turn and ran down the hall, chased by the sound of laughter and the echos of another crack from the billiard table. She had heard more than enough.

Caroline Meets the Colonel

I will not cry, I will not cry!

Caroline ran blindly through the back halls of Netherfield, down the back stairs, landing directly in the kitchen. All heads turned and all conversation halted, the only sounds came from a boiling pot, logs snapping in the hearth, and the sharp inhalation of a surprised and none too unschooled scullery maid.

“Pardon the intrusion,” Caroline stood straight as a ramrod, feeling every inch the outsider, “I...I require an apple or perhaps a carrot.”

The head cook, a red-faced woman named Mrs. Goodson-or Goodman-whoever, Caroline could not recall at the moment, rushed her assistant to the root cellar to collect the requested foodstuffs. “Is there anything else we can provide you with, Miss Bingley, ma’am?” Mrs. Goodson-Goodman-whoever inquired.

“No, no. No, I thank you. Just the apple. Or carrot.” Caroline offered lamely, “Dinner was excellent. My compliments on the venison. The currant sauce was superb.”

Mrs. Goodperson smiled, “Thank you, ma’am! It was my mum’s receipt. It is the horseradish you would be liking. That is the secret. Just a bit of savory to cut the sweet.”

It was Caroline’s turn to be surprised, as she had not expected to be engaged in conversation, and already struggled to maintain her composure. “Yes...yes, the contrast was quite lovely.”

She hesitated before adding, “I did not think to ask, but if you have other receipts, other specialties you feel would add grace to the table, please do tell Mrs. Nicholls. We plan the menus for the coming week each Thursday morning. As I am sure you are aware. I would welcome such addition Mrs.... Mrs. Goodwin.” Goodwin. That was it.

Mrs. Goodwin smiled broadly this time, “I would be honored to offer some suggestions to Mrs. Nicholls.”

The cook bobbed a curtsy as her assistant hurried behind her with both an apple and freshly scrubbed carrot, fumbling them in her haste.

Caroline took them from Mrs. Goodwin with a genuine smile, “I thank you.”

She dipped her head, nodding to each servant as she made to exit through the kitchen door, and held up a hand as a scullery maid jumped to open it, “No need. I can manage well enough, thank you.”

She gave the girl a bright smile as she slipped halfway out the door, “And thank you for scrubbing the carrot.” The scullery maid’s eyes widened, and she grabbed her skirts with sudsy hands in a clumsy dip to Caroline.

As the door began to close behind her, the buzz of a busy kitchen recommenced and a happy voice chirped over the din, “The Mistress ain’t so bad as all that now, is she?”

“Maybe a little daft, going outside dressed for a—”

Caroline’s eyes opened wider than the startled scullery maid’s, but the latch caught and the thick door put an end to it. She was done listening to others talk about her anyway. Tears welled in her eyes. Too many words to sort out in her head. Or maybe it was her heart the needed to sift through the ashes after that house fire of a half hour.

It ached something fierce, her heart. Did anyone like her? Her life’s work to be appealing and respectable...All her hard work...did any of it matter?

The cold air cut through her self-pity and the too thin dress she wore. She cursed the steamy heat of the kitchen as she hurriedly picked her way between icy patches in the yard between the kitchen and the stables. Then she gave thanks for the late hour, the dark, and the cold, all of which meant no one would be about.

“Only foolish, crazy misses in dinner gowns, and they were in short supply in November.” She laugh-cried at her own joke as she stood in front of the stable door.

Cradling both apple and carrot in one hand, she took the cold iron handle in the other, and pushed. The door moved but an inch. A plume of breath poured from between chattering teeth, and Caroline put the treats on the ground. She pushed with both hands. The scarred door groaned and slide another inch, so she leaned in with her shoulder, pressing all her weight against the cold door. It gave way suddenly, dragging Caroline with it, and she fell forward into the now empty space where solid door once stood.

She howled in pain as her knees struck the uneven, cold, granite

cobbles, palms scraped the floor and the rest of her person folded to the ground, as she yielded to gravity...coming to a full stop when her head bounced tightly on the stone. Just like Galileo's oranges.

The strange thought made her laugh, which sounded oddly hollow to her. The cold surroundings faded and her ears filled with a low buzzing, like a chorus of bees singing the same note, and the stable filled with a veil of pale yellow, prickling light.

* * *

She felt a warmth against her cold cheek. So cold. A gentle touch moved down her back, deepening then backing off entirely. Warm hands worked their way down each of her arms...feet gently turned and touched, then ankles...then knees slowly lifted, articulated, and carefully placed back on the cold floor.

The bees were mercifully quieting. The cold floor felt good, and she slowly drifted off into a peaceful slumber. Suddenly and without warning, she felt herself rising, propelled through the air faster than possible, and then her body seemed to catch up with her head.

She found herself fully supported, cradled like a baby in a half embrace against a warm, warm body. Her vision was still full of the sickly light, and she could not find her voice. She thought she might vomit.

She leaned her head into a broad shoulder and closed her eyes against the light, feeling much more comfortable than she had a moment ago, and drew in several deep breaths.

Horse, definitely. Leather, yes. And something altogether more pleasant...a clean, citrus sort of smell...Galileo's oranges again. Except maybe Galileo had lemons too.

She reached out and inhaled sharply as her palms felt on fire. It cleared her head for a moment, and the wooziness returned. She extended her fingers, walked them over collar bones, ran them over a strong neck and along a rough jaw. Done with exploring, she nestled into a firm chest. Caroline let herself go limp, layering all of

these sensations with the memories of being carried to bed by her papa as a small child. Sleepy, secure, contented.

Her peace was disturbed as the arms shifted and shook her ever so slightly, jostling her back to present. Slowly she opened her lids and found herself looking into a set of dark eyes, worried looking even in the dim light, focused entirely on her own, and conveying some kindness along with the concern.

“There you are.”

The deep voice resonated through her body and delightfully wound its way through the fog in her head. “Welcome back. Are you well, madam?”

Caroline shivered and grasped onto the soft, cotton lawn of his collar to pull herself more upright, hissing as the sting of her scraped skin made itself known again.

“You...” she pointed a finger, “I...I fell, and...”

“Yes you did fall, and now I have you. I don’t believe you have suffered any serious damage. How may I best assist you? Do you feel able to sit?”

The words vibrated through her being as she continued to stare into those darkened eyes. “Sit?” Caroline gradually took in her surroundings, a thick arm holding her close, her hand wrestling against this man’s chest, and the feel of his warm, strong body pressed against her own light form.

Not her papa.

She reached up and absently twirled a sandy lock of his hair in her fingers. Soft.

Certainly not a Netherfield groom, and not a Netherfield footman...though if he were a footman, his very athletic form and strong jaw would earn him a pretty penny. A footman should be large if possible...and attractive.

Caroline shook her head slightly and winced.

“Maybe not sitting just yet.”

This man definitely qualified as attractive. Louisa would be so envious to be held so effortlessly in the arms of this handsome... person. Bernie could barely hold his liquor much less a lady. She snorted. Did Hertfordshire grow such fine specimens? Maybe Hertfordshire was more pleasant than she had thought.

Her cheeks flushed with heat, and Caroline tried hard to gather thoughts, shocked at the direction they had taken flight.

“Your color is returning,” came the voice again, drawing her

eyes back to his. All solicitude, those eyes, the corners crinkled nicely with some amusement, but she sensed none of it was mean-spirited. They were more gentle crinkled eyes.

His skin contrasted greatly against his white shirt, and as she searched his face, looking for some recognition — who knows, he could be one of the footmen, or a tenant farmer, or created entirely from the fantasies buried in her now-broken brain — he grinned, revealing equally white and even teeth.

Not a footman. Too confident, his clothes too fine. Nice teeth.

“Shall we see if you can recline or sit on your own?”

His comment drew her attention back to her current position.

In his arms.

And the impropriety, the absolutely scandalous position in which she found herself struck her with full force.

She pushed firmly against him, wincing as the throbbing increased in her hands, and noticed that her knees too offered their protestation as she struggled to free herself. The sharp pain cleared her head all at once. “You will unhand me, sir! Who are you?”

“Shh. You are safe, all is well. I am a friend. I merely wish to know that you feel able to support your weight, that you can stand on your own, before I put you down.”

“I am quite fine. You must put me down at once. This is...most unseemly. Put me down!” she gasped as he walked deeper into the stable.

He stepped into one of the stalls, and she had a moment of panic as she thought of all the babies said to be made in hay. She squirmed and twisted in his arms, and regretted it immediately as her head swam and the buzzing returned.

Then she noticed his grimace, his dark eyes squeezed tightly together. His gentle smile lost in a tight, grim line. “Did I hurt you?”

“It is nothing. Pray forgive my display. It was but a pinch.”

He bent to place her on a mound of hay covered with a blanket. The movement brought her face inches from his, his eyes on hers once more, and for a moment she thought...but then to her dismay, his face etched in discomfort again.

“You are not well.”

“I am well enough, but I beg you my lady, please release your hold on me so I may place you gently down.”

She started and withdrew her arm which she had wound tightly

around his neck at some point.

He went down on one knee and placed her slowly and softly onto the blanket, wincing slightly as he straightened.

“There you are.”

The same words to which she had awakened, but this time they sounded dismissive to her ears, gone was the intimate solicitude she had thoroughly enjoyed. Enjoyed? Had that even been real?

“Right as a line.”

He turned abruptly and left. She heard the door to the stable shut firmly.

“Well! I have never been so ill-used. To be thrown into a pile of dirty straw, abandoned, and having my person so...so...thoroughly examined...”

She recalled just what had occurred with her person. It seemed dreamy, and she could not say for certain, but it would seem...it would seem that this very attractive footman-tenant-laborer had run his hands over her...over her everything.

“Yes? You were saying something?”

Caroline hopped up from reclining and held a hand to her heart.

A head popped in from the side of the wooden enclosure. Dark eyes bored into her own...did those eyes twinkle, or were they simply catching the flicker from dim lantern he had hung from the side of the enclosure?

“You startled me.”

He leaned further into the stall, neck, then shoulders, then those same strong arms that had been wrapped around her appeared.

“My sincere apologies. But was that a word of gratitude I heard before? For aiding a damsel in distress?”

The man fully emerged into the stall door and bowed deeply before her, “I am but a wayward knight at your service, m'lady.”

“I thank you. But no to your question...that is, I was saying...I have nothing to say. Well yes, that is, I mean to say...well, I am rather mortified that you have come upon me...I was so, so...” She shook her head, her lips pinched.

“So vulnerable? So in need of assistance? Think nothing of it. We all need a hand up on occasion.”

He smiled at her. It was a very good smile.

“No, that is not it at all,” she protested, “and you appear more wayward knave than knight errant! Taking advantage of discomposd ladies.”

“Discomposed?” he snorted, “If you insist. I would call it impaired, pained, or even insensible. Discomposed is a blowsy bonnet, a misplayed note on the pianoforte. But I will give you discomposed, if you insist. And I will give you this.”

He took her hand in his, and raised it, turning it scratched palm side up. Her stomach clenched as instead of the kiss she semi-expected, he unsheathed a knife from his boot. She snatched her hand back, which drew a chuckle from him.

“So little trust.” He revealed the left hand that had remained hidden behind his back during his courtly bow, and produced the apple she had left at the door. He sliced it in two and placed both halves in her upturned hand.

“Your apple, m’lady.”

She smiled, mostly in response to his gallantry, but also because he wiped the blade clean on his pants and replaced it in its sheath. The knife put away and her tattered nerves thus settled, she looked at the apple in her hand.

“I thank you.” She met his eyes, and held fast, willing him to understand that her meager words of gratitude covered more than the apple in her palm. It was all she had at the moment. Her brain still unable to string together anything meaningful.

He held her gaze for some time and then the crinkle-eyed smile returned. “You are most welcome. M’lady.”

He unhooked a great coat from the post. She hadn’t noticed it. The coat was definitely military — grey wool with epaulettes on the shoulders and two rows of gold buttons with some sort of crest. He leaned in and draped it around her shoulders. “Better?”

The coat covered her and then some. She was enveloped in fine wool and her senses filled with the light citrus scent she has smelled earlier. She pulled the coat tight under her chin with her free hand, “Yes, thank you,” Caroline’s eyes took in the man before her...sandy hair, unfashionably long and pulled back in a queue from which several wavy locks had escaped. Generous mouth, the tanned skin and developed muscles of a worker, cravat loosely tied at his thick neck, shirt untucked from cream breeches that hid his thighs...

Too late did she avert her eyes, realizing that he was fully aware of her shameless and thorough examination. She ducked her face lower in the fabric, so that only the hand holding the apple was visible, “But I am not easy enjoying the comfort of your coat when you are left to the cold, sir.”

It was an apology of sorts for her rudeness in staring.

He smiled at her, a slightly mysterious smile, but quickly schooled his features, and ducked out of the stall. A hand reached back and claimed the jacket that hung from the same peg that previously held the great coat.

She sat alone, holding the cut apple, and inhaling the scent of him from the coat. She shivered and pulled the coat under her bottom. She was sleepy and closed her eyes. Just a little rest would restore her.

She woke to a softly whistled tune, almost like a lullaby.

"There you are."

The smile was back. On a very different man than had left her some minutes ago. Unruly hair tamed under a bicorn hat with a short red and white plume, cravat impeccably tied in a simple knot, shirt tucked and topped with a dark blue jacket with crisp white facings and gold braid, red silk sash tied about his waist.

"Dashing."

"Forgive my earlier state of undress. I had just arrived, and you caught me having just finished tending to my horse and getting ready to bed down for the night. I prefer not to tend my horse in uniform, as it takes quite some time setting the jacket to right with so much horse hair caught in all this," he swept a hand over the braid and buttons.

The transformed state of dress seemed to transform their easy talk, and suddenly Caroline felt shy of him, as he stood almost at attention, the crinkle at the eyes gone.

He walked into the stall, and offered her his hand, "Have you recovered sufficiently to try standing? Sleep is inadvisable after a blow to the noggin. I would much rather see you returned safely to the house where someone can tend to you properly."

Caroline took his hand, and he lifted her to her feet. She wobbled slightly, and he pulled her to his arm to steady her.

"I am fine. Really. Just a bit—"

"Discomposed?"

"Stiff. Cold and stiff." She removed her hand from his arm, and squared herself, feeling less wobbly and more like herself. She leaned her head back to look down her nose at him, which was some feat considering their relative heights. "If you are going to insist on baiting me so, you will bring out the bear, you know. I do not even have the advantage of your name, sir."

The grin returned.

He took a step back, and again bowed deeply, removing his hat in a well-practiced, sweeping gesture. "Richard Edward George Stanhope Fitzwilliam, Colonel in service of his Majesty's 1st Hussar Regiment of the King's German Legion, and Knight Companion of the Most Noble Order of the Garter...at your service,"

He stood. "And you, m'lady, must be Caroline Bingley, lately of Grosvenor Square via Scarborough in North Yorkshire."

Caroline was stunned.

"I am at a distinct disadvantage, it would appear. How is it you know me, and why is an officer in the King's German Legion hiding in a stable at Netherfield Hall, in the middle of Hertfordshire?"

"Oh, well I'm here for the carrots," He pulled the well-scrubbed carrot from within his jacket and bit off the tip with an impressive snap.

Caroline could not help but laugh. "That was meant for Titania."

"Titania? The Fairy Queen herself? I had no idea she was fond of carrots."

"It is true, although apples are her first choice. Allow me to make the introduction. She is but a few stalls down, you may have heard her nickering, for some time now. She knows I am only in the stables for her, and I always bring a treat."

They slowly walked between the stalls until Caroline stopped and turned. A dark gray nose emerged, lips extended with busy nostrils sniffing out her treat. Caroline coaxed the horse forward by holding out her palm with one half of the apple, and the dark gray nose was followed by a dappled silver face covered prettily with a shock of dark gray mane.

The Colonel raised his eyebrows in surprise and grinned at Caroline, who in turn, again, felt a bit off kilter.

"Titania is an Andalusian. And a fine one at that," complimented the Colonel, as he slowly moved forward to stand beside Caroline. He offered his hand for the horse's inspection.

Caroline would not look up at the man, who stood so close that she could feel heat radiating from his body. "She is indeed," she replied.

She stroked the horse's neck as Titania finished off the second half of the apple. The horse lowered her head to Caroline, who leaned forward until they stood touching foreheads as if communing, as Caroline scratched the horse behind her ears. "No

more for you, sweet girl. Now say good night to the good colonel," she quietly murmured as she dropped a kiss where her forehead had been. She side-stepped from the stall and put a bit of distance between herself and Colonel Fitzwilliam.

"She is a beautiful animal. Is she fully matured?"

Caroline instantly understood his question. "Yes, she will keep her dappled gray coat. It is partially why I lucked into finding such a fine horse as she. Because her coat did not fade to white, the breeder was afraid she would pass her dappled coat to any offspring. He felt she was not worthy to breed, so he let her go at a young age and for a fraction of her worth. But what does he know." She reached out her hand and stroked the horse's muzzle.

"Her bloodline is really, very impressive," she continued. "Charles bought her for me for my debut into society when I turned eighteen. I dare say she is the best gift I have ever received."

"You said partially?"

Caroline laughed, "Well, in addition to having been deemed the wrong color, my girl possesses a stubborn streak. She can be willful, and has been known to nip at people she does not like. She really does go against the breed. We get along quite nicely though, Titania and I. We understand one another completely."

He nodded in appreciatively at the horse, and then looked to Caroline. "Since we are so happily increasing our connections tonight, may I introduce you to my own mount?"

Caroline raised an eyebrow at his choice of words; she had been exposed to enough libertines in her two and a half seasons to recognize wordplay for what it was, yet was still innocent enough to feel her face burn at the thought of it.

Colonel Fitzwilliam noted both eyebrow and blush and reddened himself, "Forgive my poor choice of speech. May I please have the honor of presenting my horse to you, Miss Bingley." Which was followed by a very proper bow, much less ridiculous than his earlier bit of play-acting. She flashed him a grin as she dipped in a matching curtsy by way of response.

He offered his arm and she accepted, as she had no desire to appear missish before this man, and instantly wondered why that was.

Colonel Fitzwilliam was obviously a man of action, comfortable taking charge and used to having his direction followed. Perhaps that was it — Caroline, like her horse, was disinclined to follow

orders. Unless they suited her.

And she had already appeared to some disadvantage before this man, that was a fact. She decided she simply did not want to appear the fool any more than she had — nothing more than that.

The Colonel went back for the lantern and they walked deeper into the stables.

They stopped a few feet from the tack room at the rear of the stables, far from the other animals. Caroline peered into the darkness. No horse.

The Colonel made a clicking sound with his tongue.

“Is this a joke?”

“Not at all. Falstaff, you old goat, show yourself. You are making us look bad.”

A snort came from the darkness.

“That is unbecoming, and you are embarrassing me in front of a lady.” Colonel Fitzwilliam removed the carrot from his jacket pocket and handed the intact end to Caroline. “She brought you something special, and she really likes horses...but if you would rather keep your own company, there are several other animals here that would be grateful for the treat.

Two clops of heavy hooves rang off the stone.

“Come on Falstaff. Don’t tell me that you are afraid of a mere slip of a woman? Come on now, show yourself.”

At that an enormous black horse stepped into the lantern light, and stamped his front hooves lightly.

“That is more like it. Miss Caroline Bingley, may I present to you my most trustworthy companion, Sir John Falstaff,” Colonel Fitzwilliam made a sweeping and very intentional gesture to the horse.

The horse stamped back and extended one front leg as he bent at the knee with his other and dipped his head low, silky black mane brushing the stone floor. “Oh but this it too much! He is as good as any actor taking his bow before the audience,” Caroline laughed in sheer delight.

“But he cannot possibly be your mount. He is immense. He could pull a coach all by himself...but riding across country or into battle...why he would make you the tallest target around!”

The horse took to his feet and walked towards her, tossing his head as if making his disagreement known, snorting and stamping with each step.

“You had better make him a peace offering of that carrot. He is very sensitive about his size. Ever since one of my closest relatives slighted him — something about his Falstaffian girth.” Fitzwilliam chuckled.

Caroline slowly placed one hand on the velvety nose to keep the horse from moving any closer. “And if he is not named Falstaff because of his size, how did he come to have such a grand appellation?” The horse nudged her hand up in the air repeatedly with his nose.

“As you noted, he is large of size, and has a robust nature to match. He lives to run at full speed, and like his namesake, he enjoys his food. He is a good-natured rascal, and smarter than I care for at times, but unlike Shakespeare’s Falstaff, he has never backed down from danger. I have never met a truer animal. Or man for that matter. But the real reason behind the name is inglorious — that horse love of drink rivals Bernard Hurst’s.” Richard Fitzwilliam gave her a delightfully boyish grin that revealed all those even, white teeth.

“And you had best produce that morsel, or he will keep pushing until you give in to him.”

Caroline held his gaze, as Falstaff happily munched the carrot she had finally produced.

“I know who you are, you know,” she said quietly. “You are that very cousin of Fitzwilliam Darcy who fought so bravely on the Peninsula against the French. And I suppose you are here for him, rather than for the carrots.”

“You have found me out, m’lady. Although these Netherfield carrots are particularly sweet.” He gifted her with a slight smile. “I am indeed here at my cousin’s bidding. I apologize to you, as lady of the manor, for not sending word of my impending arrival. I had planned on staying here tonight and making my presence known in the morning.”

“Stay here,” she exclaimed incredulously, “In the hay, with the horses? That is absurd.”

“I have slept in much less hospitable conditions, I assure you. And I rather prefer the company of horses to that of most men. Besides, I cannot in good faith call upon a house that has gone to bed, now can I? Not without raising some alarm, and I have no wish to disturb the sleep of my good cousin or your good servants. It would be unseemly.”

“More unseemly than sleeping in the dirt, like some poor wretch?”

“Well, Miss Bingley, if you are willing, you could escort me back to Netherfield Hall,” he grinned roguishly, “and awaken your staff to prepare a room, alert my cousin and your brother to my presence...but at this late hour, I am afraid that they might question how you came upon me, quite alone, quite unprotected...here in the dark.”

It sounded so alluring, the way he said it...Caroline sighed without realizing she had done so.

He turned and faced her. “Would the servants talk? Suppose some lovers’ rendez-vous? Some would consider your character well-compromised at this point already, you know. Your brother Charles certainly may hold us accountable. He is a jovial fellow, but he does take his duties as a gentleman rather seriously. I am but a second son and slightly less polished, but some would still consider me a worthy catch. Do you hear the wedding bells ringing?”

She stepped back, keeping a more respectable amount of distance between them. “Your point is taken, Colonel Fitzwilliam.”

She shrugged off his great coat and handed it over from arm’s length. “I thank you for assisting me through my earlier confusion. When I was discomposed. I will gladly welcome you tomorrow morning, and will be sure to have an ample breakfast laid out, as a man cannot live on carrots alone. Please forgive in advance the deception I will employ when we are introduced for the first time. Again”

He walked her to the heavy wooden door, and opened it just wide enough for her to pass through, and then took her hand. “You should put something on these scrapes.” He gently traced over her palm, placed the lantern in her fingers, and then closed them over the handle. “And Miss Bingley, I will be most pleased to make your acquaintance tomorrow. Again.” They stood facing one another for a long moment. Then she pushed through the opening into the cold air and was gone.

Compresses, Hay, and Sweet Dreams

Caroline sat at her dressing table, as her lady's maid applied cold compresses to her hands. She was lost in thought as she sat with the clothes on her upturned hands, and Blanchet picked up the discarded gown from beside where she sat.

"Pardonnez-moi, Miss Caroline, but it does seem a shame to discard such a lovely dress for just these marks and small tears on the skirt piece. If you would like me to save it for you, I would be happy to see if I could find an appropriate fabric in Meryton tomorrow. I am sorry that you lost your footing on your way to visit your horse. I will return the lantern to the stables before I retire, and none will be the wiser."

"No!" Caroline interjected loudly before gaining control of her tone, "No that will not be necessary. I feel bad enough having kept you from your bed for so long, Blanchet. Please do not trouble yourself with what may be done by a footman in the morning. As for the dress...you may keep the dress for yourself, if you like, for you take such excellent, thorough, and kind care of me. You should have something for the inconvenience I have caused you."

"It is not inconvenience, Miss Caroline."

"Tomorrow afternoon you should go to Meryton," Caroline produced several coins from a small box in her dressing table, "and find some lovely fabric to make the repairs to your dress, and something soft and warm which I may wrap around myself to keep warm in this drafty house, and one for you too. And feathers! Lots of feathers. All white."

The maid objected to such generosity, and Caroline dismissed such speech, and both were satisfied with the outcome — Blanchet ended up with a fine gown to repair and remake in a naturally more restrained fashion, complete with a warm, new wrapper. And Caroline was satisfied that there would be no questions and no talk of her adventure that night.

Caroline was tucked into a warmed bed, and salve smoothed

onto her hands and scraped knees. "That will be all, Blanchet, a million thank you's for your tender ministrations. If you do not hear me stirring, please awaken me well before breakfast tomorrow morning. Good night."

Caroline sat still, her mind swirling with the night's happenings.

She leaned over abruptly and blew out the candle, burrowed back into her pillows, wincing slightly as she wiggled into a more comfortable position.

In the morning, she would have to endure more subtly disapproving tuts when Blanchet discovered the small knot on Caroline's head. Luckily her hair would cover any discoloration that might occur, and she would instruct Blanchet to style her hair in a looser, softer manner than her customary look. As if it was not bad enough that she would have to keep her hands hidden or wear gloves for the next several days.

Caroline tried to remember everything her terrible brother Charles and the Despicable Mr. Darcy had ever said of Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam. She most likely had not paid close attention. A second son. A soldier. Nothing in those words that would have held her interest.

She, of course, had heard Darcy speak of his cousin quite recently, as Darcy had been greatly relieved to receive a letter from him whilst Jane and Elizabeth Bennet were in residence — entrancing her brother and Mr. Darcy, respectively. She frowned at the memory and gingerly shook her head to concentrate on her task, which had nothing to do with those distracting Bennets and everything to do with the man in the stables.

Darcy spoke of his cousin's heroism...and that he was recovering from an injury sustained in battle. He had thought him still in Spain. Another reason for not paying close attention. Geographical proximity, or lack thereof.

"But what was it Charles had said?" she murmured. Something about their days at University, and about Darcy and he visiting some estate in Derbyshire during their holiday break...an estate that was not Pemberley...

Of course that too had failed to pique her interest as Charles could regularly be found at any number of friends' country estates. Or at his club in town. Or anywhere, really, that Caroline was not. So it had been since he had been sent to Eton and she to Miss Ryall's. And yes, Miss Ryall was indeed a saint. The only one to

offer both correction and love to Caroline.

What had Charles offered her, but a fragile respectability and a roof over her head. Love, she supposed, at least the love that came naturally to being part of a family. But certainly not guidance, and most definitely not his time.

The year of her coming out had altered that practice significantly, as Charles had been required to escort her to every ball and function at which a young lady must be present. It was the most time they had ever spent together.

She was thankful for his enthusiastic participation during her entry into society, as without his numerous friends with country estates, she would never have received the oh so valuable and sought after entry to Almack's, and the invitations to teas and dinners that elevated one's level of society. Whatever connections she could claim were generally founded on the constant good humor of her brother.

Once introduced, the task of maintaining those relations was squarely on Caroline. She had found this a simple feat in that most young ladies of the ton were quite satisfied to admit a new friend to their circles — provided she was well-dressed, well-spoken, entertaining, and born low enough as to not threaten their chances of securing any marriageable partner's attention at social gatherings.

She did have some of her own friends from school, but those ladies were really only *friendly* after she had been seen in the company of Mr. Darcy. She held no illusions about those girls seeking her company based solely her charms — they too needed to climb to loftier circles than those to which they were born. Caroline was only as valuable as her connections.

She hazily drew her thoughts back to the present, back to her newest connection, but was overcome by the fatigue of the late hour and the great tumult of the night. As she drifted, she recalled as much as she could about her encounter in the stables, and as she finally succumbed to sleep, it was with a soft smile upon her lips.

Richard Fitzwilliam drew his greatcoat around him and burrowed into the wool blanket he had repositioned on the mound of hay. He had watched Miss Bingley's progress in the pale light of the lantern until she was safely indoors.

This was the fearsome Caroline Bingley from whom Darcy had hidden himself away? He shook his head.

His cousin was decidedly gun-shy when it came to women, and with good reason; he had been stalked by nearly every miss and mother in England, and Richard himself had been witness to more than one attempted compromise since Darcy had inherited Pemberley some five years earlier.

But Caroline Bingley was no tiger, no hunter of men or lambs. She was but a young lady, and a rather vulnerable one at that. A blushing innocent who loved her horse enough to seek solace in the stables on a bitter night. He had seen the tear stains on her cheeks. Horses over humans. Just like him.

Her reactions to his mild flirtation was equally telling — a more calculating lady would have encouraged his bawdier attentions. Miss Bingley did not know if she should be flattered or offended by his blatant coquetry.

Darcy had apparently grown afraid of his own shadow. Poor, rich Darcy.

If one were counting, his cousin would easily be placed in the top five most eligible bachelors in all of Britain, including her many colonies. If he could but choose one out of his innumerable admirers, settle down at Pemberley with a wife, then perhaps the field would be cleared for the likes of Bingley and himself. The Colonel started at the thought. Where had that come from? As he relaxed into his prickly bed, he considered.

His career in the military hung in the balance. He would unquestionably lay down his life to serve God and Country, but recovery from the injuries he sustained on the Spanish coast was slow. And Richard Fitzwilliam had found he did not enjoy directing men's lives from behind a desk. Consigning unknown soldiers to unknown fates based on the moving lines on a map was not for him.

On the battlefield and even in training, he could do his best to ensure that those who reported to him were given every advantage possible and were proficient in the skills of warfare they needed to

survive — an impossibility from the War Office.

He could work in the shadows...he was certainly skilled in espionage, and had used those skills to his every advantage on a number of occasions. But he enjoyed employing deceit and trickery even less than he did working as a paper soldier.

His uncertain future weighed heavily on his mind.

And while he was being completely honest with himself, and he was nothing if not honest, he had greatly enjoyed the feel of holding the svelte Miss Bingley in his arms. He pulled his great coat tighter around him, and grinned himself to sleep.

Breakfast of Champions

Caroline adjusted her tea cup on the saucer moving its handle precisely to four o'clock for the third time since she replaced the cup on the saucer.

When she moved to smooth the napkin on her lap she was interrupted by her sister, "Caro, what has you so distracted this morning? You are fidgeting and fussing as if you were awaiting your first pianoforte recital."

Caroline stared at her cup and willed her hands to relax. "I do not fidget, Louisa. Fidgeting is for children. Please forgive me if I appear distracted. I have been contemplating a theme for Lydia Bennet's ball, and I confess it feels a bit much this morning."

Louisa laughed, "What an excellent diversion! Do not doubt yourself, sister. I know that you will throw the most delightful ball ever. It shall be the grandest and most talked about event these parts have seen. But perhaps we should call it Caroline Bingley's ball."

"I suppose I should simply refer to it as the Bingley Ball, but Lydia takes such pleasure in hearing her name attached to it."

Charles chuckled, "Whatever we call it, let us not make it too grand. I would like to have enough left on the accounts to purchase at least moderately nice gifts for my sisters this Christmas."

This earned Charles a smile from Louisa, and the conversation calmed Caroline enough to prevent her from jumping when the footman opened the door and finally announced the unexpected visitor whom she alone had been anticipating.

"Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam."

"Richard!" Darcy exclaimed jumping up from his chair as the Colonel strode into the room — that man's request for the company to remain seated lost in the resulting commotion of varying emotions, greetings, and movement.

The cousins exchanged a hearty embrace, with noticeably glittering eyes and multiple pats to the back. Surprised by such a display by the habitually reserved Fitzwilliam Darcy, Caroline was transfixed by the happenings until the moment was broken up by

her brother.

Charles also claimed a greeting, which although only comprised of clasped arms and chucks to the shoulder did not suffer by comparison. Hurst followed suit and, although a bit more formal, his welcome was also warm and genuine in its expression.

The colonel was universally admired.

“How is it that you are here, cousin? And at such an early hour? Although I should not be surprised at your having arrived in time to claim a meal,” grinned Darcy with equal parts enthusiasm and real surprise.

“You ask for my aid Darcy, and I come running. You know that.” The colonel grinned at his cousin, “But what has happened to your manners in my absence?”

Darcy chuckled and embraced Colonel Fitzwilliam once more. and offered the necessary introductions to the ladies, “Forgive me my poor manners, Louisa and Caroline, and please allow me the pleasure of introducing you to my cousin, Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam.” The ladies nodded their heads as Richard bowed.

“And Richard, may I introduce to you Bingley’s sisters, Mrs. Louisa Hurst, and Miss Caroline Bingley.” The sisters performed a very graceful and synchronized curtsy, and if one’s cheeks were a deeper color than the other’s, no one commented.

“Colonel Fitzwilliam,” Caroline smothered her jitters with undue formality, adopting her most regal posture, “Welcome to Netherfield Hall. Please do join us for breakfast,” she gestured to the table, where a well-trained footman had just finished adding a place setting.

Their eyes met. The Colonel gave her a simply brilliant smile.

“If it is not too much trouble, m’lady.”

“Any relation of Mr. Darcy’s is most welcome in our home,” Caroline broke their gaze first, and asked for the company to excuse her, as she needed to arrange a room for the Colonel with Mrs. Nicholls. Richard watched her retreating form, and the remaining party sat down to a much livelier conversation than had previously been enjoyed in that room.

Breakfast finished, the men headed to Bingley’s study to hear more from Colonel Fitzwilliam about the latest battles, and to discuss manly considerations deemed unfit for female ears. Louisa found her sister in the small sitting room that served as Caroline’s study, and they began to make plans for Lydia Bennet’s ball.

Sister Talks

The ladies lamented repeatedly the fact that Lydia Bennet had named the 26th of November as the date of the ball, as they longed for a masque, but both allowed that it was far too early in the season for such a masque, even if it was the most intriguing sort of theme, and neither wanted to risk appearing unfashionable by holding a masque outside of Twelfth Night.

Louisa proposed that they simply make it an elegant evening, and she and Caroline ordered everything from London — London musicians, hothouse flowers, swaths of fabric to drop about the house, and an obscene amount of beeswax candles from the chandler — all of which would likely exceed the budget Charles had in mind for the celebration.

“Louisa, last night I had an inspiration. Where do you think we can find a profusion of feathers this close to the date?”

“Did you ask Blanchet?”

“She was no help. She went on and on lamenting the loss of her French plumassiers.”

“Hmm. Let me think about this. I will do some digging.”

“And do you think Charles would allow for the cost of an artist to chalk the ballroom floor? I rather like the idea of the heaven on earth, or something that hints at angel’s wings — anything really that incorporates feathers in the theme — what are your thoughts?”

Caroline’s query went unanswered as Louisa attention was fixed on the view from the front window.

“Where do you suppose they are off to so early in the day?” asked Louisa as she moved closer to the pane of glass, eyes fixed on Darcy and his cousin riding out in the direction of Meryton.

Caroline joined her sister to better see the riders. “I have no idea, but at least they are not heading to Longbourn. Instead of greeting me as an affectionate brother should this morning, Charles’ first words to me were positively martial. He informed me that we are to call upon the Bennet family. He wants to make certain that Miss Bennet has not suffered a relapse of health. One can only assume that Mr. Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam heard of our

brother's plans and had the good sense to be elsewhere. God knows I would prefer to hide when the time comes for that visit."

"Caroline!" laughed Louisa, "You must not speak so of our closest neighbors. Have you failed to notice how taken our brother is with Jane Bennet?" Louisa picked up a fashion magazine and reclined in the corner of a sofa.

"The doors are closed, and no servants are present, Louisa. You need not be so kind, and I should be allowed to speak my mind. Of course I have noticed Charles' preference. How could one but notice his mooncalf gazes at the angelic Miss Bennet. I have also noted Mr. Darcy is equally enamored of that scheming Miss Elizabeth Bennet. I can readily understand how Charles can be taken in by a pretty face and the most insipidly kind disposition ever to be found, but how a man as intelligent Mr. Darcy could allow himself to fall prey to a conniver the likes of Miss Eliza is...is...well it is simply inconceivable."

"Inconceivable? No..." Louisa paused as she thumbed through the pages, "But unexpected most definitely. Miss Elizabeth is decidedly novel in her pursuits...reading Greek philosophies and tromping about muddy fields are not the typical accomplishments of a gentleman's daughter...but conniving she is not. I find her to be rather direct in her opinions...much more open and artless than conniving."

She closed the magazine. "You think she designs her speech to flatter Mr. Darcy? I thought she had made her dislike of him very plain. You are right about one thing though, she has certainly caught his eye."

Louisa looked up and raised her brows. "Caro, you make your displeasure far too obvious. Enough about the Bennet sisters for now...tell me your first impressions of the dashing Colonel Fitzwilliam!"

Louisa's mild upbraiding and then abrupt change of topic caught Caroline off guard. She felt her cheeks flame even as she attempted to better regulate herself.

"He was most definitely remiss in not alerting us to his coming. Whoever would arrive uninvited at breakfast? It displays a most careless attitude towards one's host, does it not?"

"Oh really Caroline! Sometimes you do confound me. I was not asking for your opinion on his manners...of his arriving on our doorstep unannounced. He obviously has some timely business with

his cousin..."

Louisa reflected for a minute then continued with a most wicked grin, "I was referring to his person. His most athletic person. He looks like he could sweep a lady off her feet and ride in the saddle all day."

"Louisa!" cried Caroline, feeling the heat sprout from her cheeks down her neck to cover her whole body. If she only knew.

Caroline hazily recalled exactly how it felt to be held against that strong body. "I cannot believe you would say such things! You are a married woman. Even if he is so very athletically formed, we should not be speaking about him so. And besides, he is not nearly as handsome as Mr. Darcy."

"Do not even attempt to convince me of your indifference to the presence of such a man. Why, you are scarlet from the crown of your head to the tips of your toes. You may be a maiden, and I may have a husband, but Colonel Fitzwilliam just exudes a barely contained power. And that long, thick mane of dark gold hair? The strong jaw and perfect teeth that flash in those devastating grins? If you do not find Colonel Fitzwilliam's presence among us a highly satisfying addition to the group, you would have to be cold dead inside."

Caroline returned her sister's smirk. "He is a rather manly gentleman, is he not!"

* * *

Mrs. Nicholls approached the doors to the sitting room to gather Miss Bingley's lists for the rider to take London. She pulled up short when she heard the peels of laughter ringing loudly amidst snorts, chortles, and other generally unladylike sounds. She smiled to herself, and waited outside until the sisters' had recovered themselves. "These Bingley women are not as bad as all that," Mrs. Nicholls spoke under her breath as she opened the door, and saw Louisa and Caroline dabbing at their eyes.

To Catch a Cad

Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam returned from their call on Colonel Forster to an empty drawing room.

Colonel Fitzwilliam dropped into one of the arm chairs in front of the dying fire. He stretched out in the chair, filling it from corner to cushion, knee hooked over one arm, his other foot resting upon an upholstered puff — the picture of casual relaxation. After pulling the cord and requesting tea, his cousin took the chair opposite him, kicking the puff out from under the offending foot of the Colonel as he sprawled.

“Well, that went as well as can be expected, I suppose,” Darcy offered up, looking anything but satisfied.

The Colonel sat up and leaned forward, elbows on knees and steepled fingers dangling in the air. “Darce, you cannot expect Wickham’s commanding officer to gleefully accept that his newest junior officer is nothing more than a...what were your words...’a flesh-mongering coward’ is, I believe a direct quote.” Richard grinned at his heavily burdened cousin. “Take heart, man. Colonel Forster is a reasonable sort, and he promised to make inquiries in and around Meryton. When he does, he will find that even though Wickham has been in residence for a short time, his Lieutenant has already run up debts with every merchant in town, has several outstanding debts of honor due to the unlucky sots in his regiment who were foolish enough to accept his vowels in place of coins, and quite possibly a dalliance or two with a bar maid or butcher’s daughter. Such it has always been with Wickham.”

Darcy groaned, “Yes, but you cannot have missed Forster’s reaction to me. He thinks that I am the blackguard! He has clearly been poisoned against me, and this is after we have dined together.”

“Wickham was quick to spread his rancorous deceit here, but you cannot be surprised by that, nor can you simply ignore the damage he is causing.”

Darcy whipped his head up at that. “What do you mean? Are you suggesting I call him out over a few insults.”

Richard laughed, "I am suggesting no such thing, but since you mention it, you really should have let me kill him after Ramsgate last summer. I am merely suggesting that it does no good at all to allow the pigeon-livered liar to prance about Meryton blackening your good name and taking advantage of good people. You need to stop him."

"Do you not see that this is what I have been trying to accomplish for over half my short life?" Darcy stood up abruptly, rattling the tea service. "We grew up together — you know him almost as well as I, Richard! And you know what is at stake if I confront the maggot. He could expose Georgiana to the worst sort of ruin. With a venomous whispered word about the time he spent entrancing her in Ramsgate, much less his attempted elopement, he could steal away the happiness of my most beloved sister, expose her to ridicule or far worse," he stalked about the room, gesticulating wildly. "Anyone at all, including your mother and father, would consider Georgiana compromised, and I will not throw away her chance at happiness to spare my own ego or the populace of this godforsaken county!"

"Peace, cousin, peace," entreated Richard, who stood and moved to pour Darcy something stronger than tea. "Come and let us discuss this with cooler heads," he said while directing Darcy back towards the chairs and handing him a glass of brandy.

"I am sorry for my outburst, Richard." Darcy placed the untouched glass on the table beside him and leaned forward in the chair, head in hands, "I know that you take prodigious care of Georgiana's reputation and are as devoted to her happiness as if she were your true sister. But you know that I cannot risk confronting George Wickham for fear of destroying Georgiana's reputation. She is but sixteen. Fifteen when the dastard wrought his pestilence."

"Well he is decidedly plague-like, but I have a plan of sorts." Darcy looked up and stared balefully at his cousin, and Richard put down his own brandy and raised both of his hands as if to surrender. "Hear me out, Fitz."

Darcy rolled his eyes at the childhood appellation.

"Let us become the sand to his oyster, and he may yet produce a pearl for us. Let us irritate him...gently vex him...narrow his society. Deprive him of his favorite activities."

"And how, Dickie, do you propose we accomplish all this? Without forcing his hand?"

“Carefully Darce, very carefully,” Richard smiled at his cousin, ignored his attempt at provocation, and took a sip of brandy, rolling it around and savoring the strong spirit before swallowing it. “Wickham has many talents...charm, confidence, more charm, intelligence, and is blessed with most handsome manners and countenance both...all that and yet he lacks two things you and I possess in near infinite volumes — ready cash and tactical genius, respectively.”

Darcy grinned at his cousin, “Is that all we are good for, cousin, my money and your cunning?”

“By no means! We are also both great dancers, and the ladies do appreciate that skill above almost all others,” he smiled back, “But to catch a scoundrel, the aforementioned assets are much more useful. If, however, you prefer more detail, I am happy to elaborate.”

“Please do,” Darcy intoned with a hint of exasperation.

“The way I see it is we establish an attack on our enemy on multiple fronts,” he held up his hand as he began to tick off points, “First, I will call upon Colonel Forster again but this time without your august company — no offense. We will speak simply as two military men of the same rank enjoying a conversation. Forster will listen to me — he is a good man, and I am a bona fide, medal-bedecked war hero. And although we hold the same rank, because I am in the regulars and he is in the militia, I technically outrank him. Yes, he will listen.

“I will encourage Forster to do what we commanders of His Majesty’s forces do best — training and drilling, followed by more intensive training and drilling. We like to keep the young bloods in the rank and file occupied — they find all sorts of trouble when left too much to their own devices, with an excess of time on their hands. The Colonel will be somewhat reluctant, as he will not win any popularity contests in demanding a more rigid training schedule, but he will be rewarded with fitter, more disciplined troops, and to our purposes, will limit Wickham’s time spent in local drawing rooms. It may even tire him out to the point where he will not be quite as eager to engage,” Richard cleared his throat pointedly, “in his more preferred physical activities...with the ladies,” he clarified.

“Yes, I did understand that you meant with the ladies, Richard,” huffed Darcy, taking a fortifying sip of his drink.

“Second, I will engage in some very Robin Hood-like redistribution of wealth, namely a generous sharing of your hard-earned funds with the other members of Wickham’s regiment. Some large bets lost at the card tables, or at dice, accompanied by a few pints of complimentary ale will make me a welcome figure among the men of Forster’s regiment. I will charm them and bribe them into accepting me as one of their own, and then I will tell them some tales of my coming of age in Derbyshire. These stories, all of the true by the way, will prominently feature a young George Wickham and young master Fitzwilliam Darcy. Nothing too damning mind you, but just enough to start them questioning the morals of their smooth talking friend. I am thinking of stories of deceit and trickery, theft and general knavery.”

“Sowing seeds of discontent?” Darcy interjected.

“Exactly so. We must tarnish Wickham’s shiny image. After stirring the pot amongst his brothers at arms, we arrive at our third line of attack. We let Wickham continue to abuse the unsuspecting shop keepers and publicans here in Hertfordshire, and when his debts grow to a size where they feel compelled to demand payment, we buy them up, as you always have covered the louse’s unpaid accounts. Combined with the receipts you already hold from his unpaid debts in both Lambton and Ramsgate, you should have more than enough to keep Wickham in Newgate prison, sentenced to breaking rocks to pay his arrears until the end of his days.

Darcy picked up his glass of brandy, and sat back in his seat, nodding in agreement, “I do at that.”

“Finally, we reach our fourth front, and this is by far the most challenging element to achieving our objective. You, my most refined and reserved cousin, must cultivate *the savages*.”

“What? What exactly does that mean, Richard?”

“Well, this is where you come into play, Darcy, in addition to financing the whole operation, of course. You must put aside years of cultivated snobbery and embrace the common man. You will exchange the Master of Pemberley mantle that you carry so nobly, and adopt a more approachable, Fitzwilliam Darcy Affable Gentleman Farmer and Bon Vivant persona.”

Darcy snorted.

“No really. You must ingratiate yourself amongst the local gentry and merchants alike. And it must be sincere to be believable.”

Darcy shook his head at his cousin and set down his glass with a thud, "First," Darcy held up his hand to tick off his own points, "I am not a snob. Second, I *am* the Master of Pemberley and it is the result of generations of hard work, not a mere coat to shrug off. Third, why do you get to have all the fun parts in this drama, and finally, how does this ensure that Wickham will simply bend to our will and not turn tail and run for the hills, dragging my sister's good name through the dirt as he runs?" he finished his clipped speech and flopped back into his chair arms folded across his chest.

"Because this campaign relies on subtlety and patience, my dear fellow, and because it will catch Wickham unawares. We will have tightened the circle, and he will be ensnared in our trap before he is even aware we are setting one. That is if you," Richard pointed his now empty glass at his cousin, "Can manage your part, and convince the good people of Hertfordshire that you do not find them at all lacking."

"But they are decidedly lacking, Richard, lacking in style, lacking in good manners, lacking in connections, and lacking in most everything a gentleman should value. I have not found one land owner in these parts, not a one, who is attempting to increase his yields for the good of his tenants or for the good of his own family. They fritter away their time at card parties, exchanging bits of gossip about their own neighbors, and being overly impressed with their own self-worth. Their so called ladies run about from house to house, scratching away at one another during so called social calls and stuffing each other's ears with reports no matter if they are false or true. When I walk into a room, they greet not my person, but calculate the number of bank notes and coins in my pockets. So why is my soliciting their good opinion even necessary for your plan?"

"You see," Richard exclaimed with a rising voice, "That is exactly what will sink us, that kind of judgmental attitude! I appreciate that the locals may not live up to your high standards of land stewardship — Pemberley is a well-maintained Eden on Earth — they do not possess the most polished manners, and I too have noted they lack fashion — gowns with too low waists on women with hair worn too high, but none of that really matters, does it? And their manners are no different than the manners found in any London drawing room. Those exalted personages drink too much, lose just as much money at cards, and just as quickly calculate your

worth when you walk through the door. These local people are not savages, Fitzwilliam, any more than I am a Duke.”

Darcy vehemently interjected, “You are the son of an Earl, Dickie, not some country squire from the hinterlands or a mere tent-stretching Redcoat, and you know it. It is not as though *you* would consider attaching yourself to a winsome country lass, no matter how sparkling her eyes...”

Colonel Fitzwilliam began a likewise impassioned retort, but it died on his lips. He squinted as if in confusion, “What did you say? We were speaking on the tactics we must employ to contain George Wickham. Are you now talking of ladies and fine eyes?” A grin slowly stretched across his face, and Darcy’s cheeks colored. “May I address those concerns later? I would like to clarify my thoughts on the Wickham matter first?”

Darcy uncrossed his arms and propped his head in his hand, “Lead on, but I beg you not to paint too pretty a picture of my sterling character.”

Richard kicked his cousin’s foot, “You are the best of men, Darce, as worthy as the most valiant soldier, closer to me than my own brother. I truly love you.”

Darcy exhaled all displeasure and nodded his head in acknowledgement, gesturing for his cousin to continue.

“But you can be a bit of a beef-wit in company. It leads to a bit of a perception problem,” Darcy snorted and made to interject but was silenced by Richard’s raised hand, “You skulk about the periphery of the room, listening to conversations buzz about you, and offer the tersest reply possible if someone dare address you directly...your intent is to discourage fortune hunters with such behavior, and I may know you to be almost painfully shy. This behavior of yours matters not at all when you are in the gilded salons of London — the Ton would forgive you anything for simply deigning to grace their salons and ballrooms with your much sought after presence — but here, in the country, in the drawing and dining rooms of Hertfordshire? Undoubtedly you have been weighed, you have been measured, and you have been found wanting,” he finished gently. “You know it is true. I have your own words, written in your letter...something along the lines of you being uncomfortable in company and Bingley forcing you to attend events. I have lived out that scene before with you. And it is not a pretty picture.”

Darcy sighed, "And if I accept your point as holding some measure of truth..." he paused, "How would one go about ingratiating oneself to...to people in general?"

Richard bestowed a warm smile on his cousin, "You already know how to do it Fitz, you just have to give yourself permission to relax and enjoy yourself. You must be a participant in the goings on around you, not just an observer. Make an effort to carry on a conversation, offer a compliment to a lady, talk about the weather or the crops if you have to, just talk to people."

Richard stood and splashed a bit more brandy into each of their glasses. "Act as though you are speaking with Bingley. You and Bingley carry on like a pair of nesting hens -

"I think not!" interrupted Darcy.

Richard shrugged, "Well you have no trouble conversing with him, so treat everyone you encounter as if he was Charles. And for God's sake, do ask some of the local ladies to dance at Bingley's ball. You cannot stand around like some outsized wall-flower. In fact, if you really want to make the local ladies swoon, dance with only the wall-flowers."

Darcy hissed. "I am committed to Miss Bingley for the first dance, and to Mrs. Hurst for the third."

"That seems to leave you free for the second, the fourth, fifth, sixth...need I continue? Nothing travels faster than gossip in a small town, Darcy. Give them something pleasing to talk about in addition to your having supposedly cheated Wickham out of a living or whatever other balderdash that lump of decay has been spewing. Dance with Miss Lonely-heart, Miss Spinster, Mrs. Widow, and Miss Down on Her Luck. And while you are at it, I believe you should be sure to reserve the supper set for Miss Fine Eyes," his face split into a grin.

"Why do I ever invite you places?"

"Invite me? Nay, Darcy, I invited myself to your little house party."

"You are like that pebble in my shoe."

"More like the rock on which you lean!"

Darcy grinned and tilted his glass in salute, "To my stoney cousin — may he continue to turn up unexpectedly — always."

"And here is to waging a successful campaign to vanquish the enemy." Richard raised his glass and the crystal sounded a decisive clink.

Dinner and a Performance

Batman, Sergeant Sebastian Tate, followed on Colonel Fitzwilliam's heels, arriving in Hertfordshire less than a day later than his commanding officer, bringing with him both a dispatch from command and the Colonel's trunk with clothing and writing materials sufficient for a lengthier stay. Sergeant Tate, being firmly set in his ways as a career military man, had upon his arrival, dismissed the Netherfield staff with a smile and a genial laugh accompanied by a firmly shut door — Tate held strong to the belief that it never served to alienate a potential civilian asset, but that it was best to keep them out from underfoot and as uninformed as possible. He then turned a critical eye on the Colonel's quarters and attire, whistling his disappointment in what he saw.

It was through the good sergeant's efforts that Colonel Fitzwilliam entered the drawing room looking his best, boots polished to a mirror finish and hair immaculately tied back. "My apologies for my late arrival. My batman is a rather fastidious fellow and will accept nothing less than shining perfection before I am allowed to join the public." He offered a bow to the lady present and then nodded to the gentlemen standing by the fire.

Bingley slapped him on the back and in his reliable cheer, refused to acknowledge any tardiness and welcomed the Colonel heartily, inquiring about the comfort of the sergeant and offering him a generous pour of spirits and the friendly conversation resumed.

Moments later, the doors opened to admit Miss Bingley.

She positively glowed — pale skin against a gown covered with cerise netting matching her lips, hair piled in soft curls on her head, blond highlights in the deep red capturing the flickering light from the candles glowing about the room. Had she looked his way, Colonel Fitzwilliam's appreciation was obvious, but her eyes were firmly set upon Darcy's person.

She attempted a dramatic entrance, pausing in the open doorway for a beat, a footman on either side, then walking regally towards the grouping, a fine burgundy silk wrapper falling down

one shoulder and floating in the air behind her. Due to Bingley's enthusiastic conversation, her entrance went unnoticed by her desired audience, and the Colonel noted that Darcy paid keen attention to Bingley's story, although the entry to the room was clearly in his field of vision. The Colonel smiled softly as he likewise noted the frown flash upon Miss Bingley's countenance before she schooled her features into the fashionable mien of bored self-satisfaction so common amongst the ladies of the Ton. This particular affectation always sat poorly with the Colonel, as he felt such artifice distasteful. Rather than finding the look alluring and mysterious, his impression was that the lady in question was either being jabbed repeatedly by an errant sewing pin accidentally left in her gown by a careless modiste, or that the lady was hiding an unsavory secret behind the unnatural smirk.

Ever determined, Miss Bingley claimed Darcy's arm with alacrity for the procession into the dining room, which Bingley suggested after completing his tale and noticing that the last member of their party had arrived. Darcy could not help but comply, and so they entered the dining room as a couple, Colonel Fitzwilliam enjoying his cousin's obvious discomfort.

Bingley sat at the head of the table, with a sister on either side, Darcy sitting beside Miss Bingley, leaving Mr. Hurst beside his wife, on Bingley's other side, and the Colonel taking the place where any future Mrs. Charles Bingley would be found, opposite Charles, at the tail of the table.

His position left him the unenviable position between two gentlemen, Mr. Hurst and Darcy. It did, however, provide him with an almost unobscured vantage point from which to observe all of his dining companions, which he indulged in openly and with relish, much to his cousin's subtle annoyance. Some of his observations were expected — Mrs. Hurst and Miss Bingley began the discussion at the dinner table, offering pithy tidbits on current neighbors, and in accordance with fashionable *ladies* everywhere, their conversation was full of thinly veiled disparagement for those friends and acquaintances not present. Equally unsurprising, the irrepressibly happy Charles Bingley turned each barb into a bouquet, praising each and every person mentioned, and turning any potential calumny to mere conversation.

To be fair, in addition to the initial barrage of complaints about the neighborhood and its inhabitants, the ladies did offer more

pleasant conversation. Miss Bingley made the first foray into civil discussion, "Did you enjoy your ride this morning, gentlemen?" she addressed the table at large, though her eyes lingered on Darcy, who glanced at her then immediately returned his eyes to his plate. "I do hope that Mr. Campbell appreciates all of the personal attention and notes Mr. Darcy has made about the state of the property, Charles," she smiled, "I thought that as your steward he himself would be more informed and require a little less direction to manage the estate." The Colonel admired her ability to at once shamelessly flatter his cousin while censuring his brother for being absent so often in service of "the good of the estate." He, of course, also realized what little good her attempts did her, and realized too that while not quite a tigress, Caroline Bingley was certainly determined in her pursuit of the title Mistress of Pemberley.

Miss Bingley's question cast a somewhat awkward silence over the group, into which void the amiable Bingley stepped in again, "Never fear, Caroline, Mr. Campbell is a most credible steward," he took a sip of his wine, and pointed the glass at Darcy. "In fact, Darcy here is the one who actually secured Campbell's service for me earlier this autumn. Mr. Campbell comes to us from one of Darcy's smaller estates in Scotland, and I count myself lucky to have such a generous friend and a talented steward. Campbell, you see, is simply shrewd enough to recognize that Darcy reads a great deal about the latest in crop rotation and other agricultural advances. *In fact*," he emphasized, "Campbell told Darcy he would only take on the position if the Master of Pemberley himself would share his opinion on the property." Bingley grinned at his sister, who bit her lip as she realized that she had inadvertently offered offense to the very person she sought to court.

Mrs. Hurst then jumped in, saving Caroline from further embarrassment and Charles from inviting her ire. "Colonel, do tell me of the fashions in Spain. Are the ladies there truly as exotic and beautiful as I have been led to believe? I have seen but few samples of their exquisite lace, and admired it greatly. "

"The lace is indeed exquisite, and you will see it worn by the more elevated in society regularly, as the cost of lace both here and there leave an viewers in no doubt as to the rank of the lady wearing it." He smiled at Mrs. Hurst and continued, "But as it is a tradition tied to the papist religion, all women wear them during holy days as a hair covering, and they are called mantillas in Spain.

In addition to the lace, Spanish ladies seem to favor ruffles and the color red.” If the men were shocked at how comfortable he was holding forth about mantillas, the ladies were entranced. “There is also a very interesting form of style known as the *Maja* or *Manola*, and you will see some more rebellious society ladies dress in a rather elaborate outfits and exhibit rather cheeky behavior. These Majas tend to...ridicule those who follow the French fashion. Majas are the stylistic exception not the rule, but it does keep social gatherings rather interesting. Life in Spain is very political, even more so than here in England, since the Corsican has brought the fighting to their soil.”

The Colonel paused and favored Mrs. Hurst with a broad grin, then turned to Caroline. “More commonly, the high ranking ladies of Spain follow the French style, and pattern their dress on the height of Empire fashion, much as you do, Miss Bingley,” his eyes danced as he purposely gazed at her alone. “You wear it so well, but one does wonder at the popularity of Frenchified fashion in such dire times as these, when all of us fight against those very dashing and foppish French.”

“I suppose when so viewed, it is rather unpatriotic,” responded Caroline tartly, “But one can hardly expect us ladies to model our dresses after your fine military uniforms, even if our riding habits do give a jaunty nod to your regalia. Surely you would object to epaulettes on ball gowns?”

“Most definitely! In fact, I heartily encourage soft silks and sheer fabrics in the ballroom.”

“Colonel Fitzwilliam!” interjected Mrs. Hurst laughing, “You sir, are scandalous!”

“You will find that my cousin can be just as cheeky as those Majas to whom he earlier referred. Now you may understand why he is here with us instead of attending dinner parties with generals in the capitol,” Darcy commented drily, “My apologies for his rather colorful sense of humor. He may speak like a rogue, but you will, in fact, find him to be the most upstanding of gentlemen.”

“A rogue? You wound me, Darce.” The Colonel covered his heart with his hand in dramatic fashion, “Even you must allow for some use of netting and the like — overskirts, wrappers, silk slippers... what exactly did you have in mind Darcy? Methinks that behind that refined and steady exterior beats the heart of a pirate. What say you, Miss Bingley?”

“A pirate!” exclaimed she. Caroline pounced on the opportunity to make up for her earlier unintentional reprimand of Darcy, as the Colonel anticipated she would. “Mr. Darcy is all benevolence. *He* would most definitely never stoop to unscrupulous or immoral behavior. *He* would never steal away with ill-gotten goods or trifle with the heart of an innocent maiden!” she finished a touch more vehemently than was appropriate, and completed her defense in a softer tone of voice, “Or whatever it is that pirates do.”

Miss Bingley dropped her eyes to her hands, and missed the admiring gaze from Colonel Fitzwilliam.

“Thank you, Miss Bingley,” Darcy offered with an expression that was at once both pained and amused, “I believe my cousin speaks in jest, as the last time I engaged in any sort of piracy was in fact with him.”

Caroline looked up at that and favored Darcy with her most encouraging expression, “Oh how intriguing! Do tell us, Mr. Darcy.”

“The details are somewhat in dispute,” Darcy smiled into his glass, watching the red wine swirl about the crystal bowl, “depending upon who is recounting the story. As I recall however, very early one morning, before the household awoke Richard and I tucked our oversized night shirts into our best breeches, covered our heads with handkerchiefs, blackened our jaws with soot, and cut eye patches out of a black wool coat in his wardrobe. We then scratched out a ransom note, cleverly disguising our handwriting by switching authors for every other word, and left it squarely centered on his father’s desk.

As Darcy warmed to his tale, he leaned forward and lowered his voice, “We then stealthily crept into the elder Fitzwilliam sibling’s quarters. We proceeded to slowly roll and tuck his counterpane and sheets around him, taking great care not to wake him, until he was so well wrapped that we could then tie a rope around his ankles and knees and drag him down the hall to Richard’s quarters. Through all this, he slept, but as soon as Richard stuffed a handkerchief in his mouth, it was as if someone cried havoc and mayhem ensued.

“Our ill-fated attempt at kidnapping and extortion ended swiftly as, in our haste, we failed to secure the heir of Matlock’s hands,” Darcy choked out past a building laugh. “He bucked, squirmed, and clawed at the carpets as we pulled him, with all the panic and strength of a trapped bear. Richard and I never made it back to his

quarters with our hostage. His brother Henry managed to grab hold of a column holding a particularly valuable piece of ancient Chinese porcelain.” Here Darcy was overcome by laughter, and paused to wipe a tear from his eye.

The Colonel stepped in to finish the story, “My brother jostled the base of the column and my mother’s prized Ming vase came crashing down on top of Henry’s head. It felt as though time stopped for a blessedly long second, and it appeared that the vase would remain intact, as Henry’s head cushioned the landing, and the precious porcelain nestled between his neck and chest. And then, the blood started flowing...” he paused and grinned at his cousin, whose laughter had quieted, but who was now shaking with suppressed mirth. “The blood flowed down into his eyes and he tried to shout or scream — we shall never know which, but it was muffled by the cloth I had stuffed into his mouth.

A faint “Ehh,” issued from Caroline whose expression was frozen in a slightly open-mouthed moue of distaste. Louisa briefly shifted her eyes and smiled at her sister’s discomfort.

“He pushed up forcefully with his arms, and my mother’s precious antique bounced into the air, landed safely once again, and proceeded to roll down the hall. Darcy and I looked at one another, frozen in indecision as to which path to take — do we drop the rope, thus allowing my now furious brother his freedom, or do we risk the vase?”

Darcy interrupted, “Of course opt to continue hauling our captive, as to release him would mean painful retribution, and ten year old boys have not the capacity to understand that the retribution of an angry twelve year old is no where near as powerful as the punitive measures of an incensed Lady Matlock,” he chuckled, “I have never been so sore of body in my life.”

Charles interjected in dismay, “The Lady had you beaten?”

Richard offered, “That is because you are so soft.”

“No,” answered Darcy first inclined his head to Charles, then rolled his eyes at his cousin, “She did not have us beaten, nor is it because I am soft, as I also recall that you, Richard, were so pained that you could not manage to raise your arms above your head to remove your soiled shirt by the end of the third day.

“It is because my clever aunt sentenced us to a month of hard labor, ‘Two weeks for each miscreant,’ she said. She granted the stable hands several days of leisure, and had us mucking out stalls,

feeding, grooming, saddling, and exercising the horses, as well as moving all of the cured hay up into the loft for storage.”

Caroline’s look of distaste turned to dismay, “She had you work as servants?”

“Oh yes,” answered Richard. “Her punishments were always lessons in humility and respect. If we did not appear properly chastened at dinner, she would add another duty to the list. So she also transferred to us moving the dung to the fertilizer pile for the gardeners,” he and Darcy grinned at one another. “And of course, my brother had to have his fun.

“One night during our penance, he sneaked into the stables, and rubbed all of the horses with mud, just so we would need to spend more effort brushing it out of their coats. Henry also found it enjoyable to join the steward each morning to ride the estate, and found need for the carriage or a mount more often than ever before, all to watch Darcy and I work a little harder. But I found I could not complain too loudly. My mother well understood my love of horses, and I learned more about caring for the animals in those two weeks than in all my time in the cavalry. My mother was a stern disciplinarian in my youth, but kind and with a ready laugh,” he smiled wistfully.

“After the first two weeks, the grooms returned to their duties, so our load was lightened considerably,” added Darcy, “And I too credit Lady Matlock with my greater knowledge of equine care. Not to mention that by the end of the month, Richard and I had grown strong enough to wrestle Henry to the ground if he attempted to bully us.” Everyone at the table joined in the laughter.

“And the vase?” asked Louisa after the laughter died down.

“Oh, it was well and properly destroyed,” the Colonel grinned at Mrs. Hurst. “When we turned our backs and continued to drag Henry to my chambers, the vase slowly, inexorably rolled down the hall, gaining momentum, and as we reached my door with our captive, began its final decent down the stairs.” He paused, “It was an huge, weighty thing. Fearsome looking, sculpted, golden dragons ran up its sides, and always made me shudder as a young lad. They were the first to go as it rolled, and bits of dragon littered the hallway and the upper stairs, a tail here, a claw there. I made off with a splintered toothy snout that I retrieved before it could be swept away by a maid, quick with her broom. The rest of the ancient container shattered into fragments when it hit the landing.”

“The unmistakable sound of smashed porcelain brought old Hodgkinson running!” Darcy added, not to mention your mother. And her shriek upon seeing the shattered vessel even brought your father from his bed.”

“Which is when we abandoned our plot for riches, dropped the ends of the curtain tie we had used to bind my brother’s ankles, and ran for the hills,” Richard chuckled. “Unfortunately, we did not run far enough, nor did we bring provisions. We climbed into the hay loft and hid in the morning shadows. My father let us fret all day, hiding deep in the piles of hay, spinning up all sorts of dreadful and fantastic punishments we were likely to receive, growing more hungry and thirsty by the hour.”

“The Earl of Matlock is well-known for his crafty statesmanship in politics, and two young boys were easy pickings by comparison, I’m sure. My clever like a fox uncle visited the stables after lunch, knowing we had hidden away under the hay up above as he spoke to his head groom. He was to ride the grounds,” Darcy adopted a deeper growl of a voice, “‘Searching for the knaves who had dared enter his house.’ He warned the men in the stable to be on the lookout for any pirates or highwaymen in the area, as a band had been sighted in the manor itself, attempted to kidnap Henry, and had left a ransom note demanding five hundred pounds for his safe return.” Darcy paused, “Then upon his return that afternoon, he informed one and all, in his House of Lords voice, that he believed the cowards had fled for their hideout when their dastardly plot had been foiled.”

“He also made mention he had best return to the house in time for dinner, as Cook was preparing a fine Cheshire Pork Pie, and how much he enjoyed a hearty, country dinner. And apricot ice. Torturous words to hungry young boys,” laughed Richard, “And my favorites too. My mother frowned upon pork pie at the table — too rustic she said — and so it was considered a rare treat, and generally only to be had from a packed basket when we were traveling down to London or to visit Aunt Catherine and Uncle Lewis in Kent.”

Darcy jumped in, “My partner in crime and I weighed our options and decided that if my uncle suspected highwaymen or pirates and had not asked after our whereabouts, perhaps we were not suspect. We were perhaps more hopeful than foolish, in our returning to our quarters, but hunger is a powerful motivator.”

“And now you know, Miss Bingley, the story of Darcy’s one and only attempt at piracy. That I am aware of at any rate. Will you ever look at him through the same eyes?” the Colonel asked Caroline, watching as her as she looked at his cousin with appraising eyes.

“Perhaps not, Colonel, perhaps not. Who knew that beneath that refined exterior beat such a reckless heart?” she gazed with such contrived longing at his cousin that the Colonel had to stifle a laugh as Darcy stiffened in his chair at being so obviously scrutinized and discussed.

Unexpectedly, Mr. Hurst came to Darcy’s rescue, easing the discomfort of some and diverting the attention of others. “Of course boys will be boys, and there is no better time for shenanigans of that nature, but what of the food in wine in Spain, Colonel? Do they make a good ragout in that country, or is it all plain fair?”

The collective company groaned at Hurst’s predictable question.

He raised his eyebrows and looked about that table, “What did I say? Cannot a man take an interest in foreign cuisine?” Hurst stood as he finished his pronouncement, and made for the doorway. “Oh stuff it all, let us retire to the billiard room gentlemen, and you can tell me about the food and wine in Spain over our port. And then I want to hear all about their bull fighting. Surely you did not travel throughout that land without viewing at least one of those battles of man and beast, right Colonel?” This last was said from the hallway as Hurst had already left his dining partners behind, happily making his way to his next glass of spirits.

Darcy and the Colonel stood and made to follow. Darcy offered each of the ladies a short bow, while the Colonel stepped to Mrs. Hurst and raised her hand to his lips, “Mrs. Hurst. I do hope you will sing for my upon our return?”

Louisa smiled widely and Darcy rolled his eyes, “I will await your command, Colonel,” she purred.

He then turned to a standing Caroline Bingley and took her hand firmly in his own. “And you, Miss Bingley, will you also perform for me?”

“Perform for you, Colonel?” she replied with arched brow and reddened cheeks, “If you are so fortunate, I will play for the group, but I perform for no one.”

“And here I was thinking that you had already graced us with a quite a fine performance this evening. But perhaps, as you suggest,

this was not for my benefit, but for your own.”

He met her surprised eyes, bowed, and released her hand before joining his cousin already on his way to the billiard room.

* * *

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* * *

“Caro! Whatever are you about?” entreated Louisa as the door shut behind the retreating maid who had finished arranging coffee and tea service in anticipation of the gentlemen’s return to the drawing room. “Aggravating our brother and his guests is not exactly the surest way to any man’s heart.”

“Do not criticize, Louisa!” Caroline bit out, “Not when my failures are so obvious to everyone, and yes, I mean everyone — from Mr. Darcy to the footman serving the soup!” she shook her head in self-recrimination. “Tonight was dismal. I failed to charm, failed to entice. I have, in fact, repulsed all males in the vicinity,” she finished quietly.

“Oh nonsense! All males in the vicinity? The young Mr. Lucas would bite his hand off if it meant you would open the ball with him,” Louisa cajoled her sister. She moved to join Caroline who sat slumped in front of the pianoforte. “And while you did perhaps annoy Mr. Darcy and Charles, you most definitely did not annoy Mr. Hurst.”

Caroline snorted, “That is because your husband finds a dinner roll more interesting than my conversation.” This earned her a tug on a curl from Louisa.

“You may be right about my husband, but you have to admit, they are amazing rolls.”

The two sisters smiled lovingly at one another as the doors opened, and the men entered the room. Louisa leaned against her sister and whispered, “And I believe Colonel Fitzwilliam would take you over a dozen dinner rolls, Caroline. You have simply been minding the wrong Fitzwilliam.”

Caught by surprise at her sister’s forward comment, Caroline immediately blushed and inhaled sharply, which Louisa kindly concealed by patting her back, giving Caroline the chance to regain her composure by feigning a cough.

“Well I still say it sounds like the worst sort of barbarism!” Bingley said to the advancing group of gentlemen.

“Which is why I suggested we leave this discussion behind in the billiard room, Bingley,” replied Colonel Fitzwilliam, his voice tinged with just a bit of exasperation, “Because it is most definitely barbaric, especially if you consider the perspective of the bull.” He stepped away from where his host and cousin had seated themselves, and greeted the ladies, “Mrs. Hurst, Miss Bingley, how delightful to find you already seated at the instrument. It will make my request for music that much more difficult to deny.” The Colonel flashed them a brilliant smile, and moved an armchair closer to the piano, angling it to better observe the performers’ expressions while out of their direct line of site.

The two women played a duet, and then Caroline sang a rather dramatic aria accompanied by her sister’s playing. Her voice, noted the Colonel was crystalline perfection, but lacked a certain warmth. Or perhaps it was restraint that he noted, diminishing an otherwise extraordinary performance. And Caroline Bingley was most definitely a consummate performer, regardless of her earlier objections.

Below Stairs

Sergeant Tate had never eaten so well in his life, and offered hearty and genuine, though certainly not profuse compliments to Cook, seated just down the table from himself. The sergeant sat well above the salt, as far as the servants' table was considered, at a place of honor beside the very head of the estate. Most households awarded him with such distinction. He attributed it to the uniform he wore.

Mr. Campbell, a Scotsman and Bingley's steward, sat at the head of the table, which was apparently a rarity at Netherfield, as he usually took to dining with his Mrs. in their cottage on the estate. Campbell had made an exception this evening, as he heard that Sergeant Tate was to be included in their numbers, and wanted to hear any first hand accounts about the continuing conflict with France that he could. Tate sat at his right hand, across the table from Netherfield's butler, Mr. Nicholls who normally presided over the table in the seat now occupied by Mr. Campbell.

Mr. Campbell's presence and that of Sergeant Tate, provided the Netherfield staff with an excuse to elevate an average weeknight dinner to a bit of a celebration, which happily coincided with Miss Bingley's request for a more lavish meal with three clearings earlier that morning from Cook, providing her with an excuse to offer some of the same dishes to their below stairs guest — waste not want not and all.

As the last dish was placed on the table, and the last scullery maid took her seat, Mr. Nicholls stood and offered a toast, "Join me in welcoming Sergeant Tate and Mr. Campbell to our table this evening," and with a special nod to himself, "Sergeant Tate, we are pleased that you and Colonel Fitzwilliam have made it home safely," he raised his glass, "and thank you for your efforts to keep England safe from the grasping hands of the despicable Frenchman." Here, heres were exchanged all around, and then Nicholls sat and the group bowed their heads as he offered, "Bless, O Father, Thy gifts to our use and us to Thy service; for Christ's sake. Amen."

Mr. Nicholls was indeed a very blessed man, as he sat beside the estate's housekeeper, Mrs. Nicholls, who was also his wife. The sergeant never understood how a man could choose a life of service, knowing that road typically precluded marriage, but it seemed as though Mr. Bingley was more permissive and liberal with his staff. Either that or this county had already lost enough men to both the war and the increasing number of factories that Bingley could not afford to be so demanding as the better houses in the capital.

Sergeant Tate was more than content with the seating arrangements, as he found Campbell to be intelligent and well-informed, and enjoyed sharing some of his tales of both victory and woe in Spain, and hearing Campbell's stories of handloom weavers burning mills and smashing machinery up in Nottinghamshire while he away fighting the French.

Neither would the sergeant complain about his dining companion sitting on his other side. She was petite and comely, a bright-eyed woman named Laurine Blanchet, who immediately corrected Nichol's mispronunciation of her name upon introduction, telling Sergeant Tate that it was said, "Blawn-shay, not BLAN-chit."

Blanchet was apparently regarded with some suspicion or at least less favor by both Nicholls, as she was a truly French maid, from France, and had only recently joined the household with Miss Bingley arrival about a month prior. It was obvious that the Nicholls' loyalty to King and Country superseded loyalty to Miss Bingley and her personal servant, and that the elderly couple appeared to take immense satisfaction in needling the elegant Frenchwoman by intentionally repeating and emphasizing the "Ch" sound even as they grudgingly dropped the hard T at the end of her name after her correction. But then, Tate understood more than most sitting around the table that the French were currently rather unpopular in England. Fashion however, always trumped politics, and France still set the style even on the battlefield. *Damn Frenchies*, he mused.

The other ladies maid, Mrs. Hurst's maid, was extended a warmer reception at the table, she being a Miss Emily Taylor from Scarborough, up in Yorkshire.

Across from Tate sat Greaves, Mr. Darcy's valet and beside him, Mr. Bingley's valet who was simply introduced earlier that evening as "Brown." Greaves sat above Brown, which was a bit unusual, being as it was technically Mr. Bingley's house, but one had but

look at Greaves to know that of all the servants gathered there for dinner, Greaves really ran the roost.

Greaves ran the roost wherever he was. The sergeant had known the valet for four years. Greaves rarely smiled, and looked out at the world through unreadable, pale blue eyes. He was always impeccably attired, and his movements were as spare as his posture was upright. He was a good man, Greaves — intelligent, stern, trustworthy, exacting standards — the ideal gentleman's man. And he scared the Dickens out of household staff wherever he traveled with Darcy. Tate enjoyed his company, and enjoyed watching the more relaxed staff at Netherfield sit up a little straighter and speak a little more formally after Greaves entered the room.

For his part, Greaves' conversation at table was limited to the "please pass..." and "thank you," and Sergeant Tate was amused to see Bingley's man Brown adopting a similar restraint, occasionally glancing over at Greaves to note how he went about the task of dining.

For her part, the sergeant noticed that like Greaves, Blanchet was content to listen more than speak, and quietly sipped her cider while the rest of the table indulged in the pitchers of ale being passed about.

Talk around the table was respectful enough, especially since Mr. Campbell was presiding at the table, and Mr. and Mrs. Nicholls brooked no direct discussion of the master of the house or his guests. The flow of conversation, however, increased in direct proportion to the flow of ale, and by the end of the meal, the sergeant felt he knew the true lay of the land, as it were.

The Nicholls unwittingly divulged more about the household than ever intended, as the sergeant was a master of subtle inquiry in addition to being keenly observant. Not to mention that Sergeant Tate, like all good military men, could handle his alcohol.

The staff, including the Nicholls, were tired. The upcoming ball had made for long days of polishing, dusting, moving furniture and installing new pieces for the upstairs servants, and poaching, blanching, and baking for the kitchen staff. Sergeant Tate learned that no expense was to be spared in the execution of said ball, and that the kitchen staff was carefully guarding a small fortune in oranges and pineapples as well as beginning preparation for an astounding amount of negus and white soup.

Mrs. Nicholls proudly boasted that the order for beeswax

candles for this one night's celebration exceeded the order for the entire year under the previous tenant's stay. She went on to detail the painstaking attention Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst were giving to the preparations, and that although the ladies had originally planned a heavenly theme complete with cherubs and feathered angel wings, upon hearing that there were not enough ostrich feathers available at such short notice, Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst settled instead on simply creating an elegant and sparkling décor, minus any plumage. London would of course provide the splendor — mirrored tables, sparkling crystal candelabra, and a profusion of rare, hot house grown flowers.

Tate was quite satisfied with the information that he had gained, nothing worthwhile had really been said, it was more an exercise in establishing the tone of the relationships about the table.

And he rather enjoyed sitting beside Miss Bingley's buttoned-up beauty of an abigail. "D'où venez-vous, mademoiselle?" he quietly asked of Blanchet, trying for his best possible French accent, which he knew still made the language sound closer to his native Newcastle accent than anything from across the channel.

Blanchet turned to face him, and cocked an eyebrow.

"Where are you from, Miss Blanchet?" he repeated in English this time in case she had failed to decipher his question.

"Oh, je vous ai compris la première fois. I understood you the first time, Sergeant. I am deciding if I desire to share any part my history with you."

"I have been called a very good listener, Miss Blanchet."

"That I do not doubt, Sergeant Tate. There is much good to be found in listening well, no? I imagine that you also do not necessarily have a love of the French though. And how am I to know that you are a friend?"

"I have met good Frenchmen and bad Englishmen, and the other way around. French is as French does, same with the English. If you were sympathetic to Little Boney, I believe you would be in France, not in England," he shrugged and returned to his plate.

Blanchet kept an appraising eye on Sergeant Tate as he ate, and eventually favored him with a subtle Gallic shrug and answered him, "I am from London, Sergeant Tate, by way of Paris, by way of Rouen."

It was Tate's turn to raise his eyebrows at her, "Forgive my indelicacy, but if you are of those Norman French, as I can tell you

are nothing if not a fine lady, how is it you find yourself in service of Miss Bingley?"

Blanchet laughed so softly that had the sergeant not been so closely attuned to her, he would have missed it. "My family is far more modest than you assume — we were neither of the Bourbon or the Plantagenet Normans. But my mother, a beautiful and very gentle lady, was a great favorite of that very French queen who found herself betrayed and imprisoned by her own people. My father worried for our safety, and arranged for our passage to England after the royal family was arrested."

She took a sip of cider, and her gaze remained on her glass. "My mother and I journeyed together under the protection of a very kind Englishman who also helped establish us in London. My father was not so fortunate," she shrugged again in that very French manner, "And so my mother was left with a young daughter, in a strange city, no friends, little money, but with her wits and her life. We were some of the lucky ones. She was good with a needle, and so when the money and jewelry ran out, she found her way to the more exclusive shops looking for work, and eventually found a desirable position with a milliner.

"They were delighted to boast of a French designer, and quickly gained a following of her own. Among the admirers of her work were the Miss Bingleys. When my mistress, Caroline Bingley enjoyed her come-out, she found she needed a proper lady's maid, and I found it more pleasurable to work in this capacity than to forever stitch bonnets and hats. Alors, I am no longer a burden to my aging mother. Here you find me at Netherfield Hall, and now you know the whole of my life, Sergeant," she looked up at him and offered a thin smile, "And you? How is it that you find yourself here?"

"Oh my story is much less interesting than yours. As a lad growing up in County Durham, which is located up in the northern wilds, close to Scotland, I enjoyed the feel of the wind on my face too much to follow my dad and my older brothers into the coal mines for the entirety of my life. I watched grandfather, my father, and my older brothers walk into the narrow shafts and return home, bone-weary and covered in black dust. I saw them suffer from the damps in the mines, suffer from the ill-effects of the dust, and of course the worst suffering — those family and friends that never came back out of the mines at all.

“I come from a large family of sturdy lads and lasses, and when we turned seven, we boys started work as trappers. We would work in the mines five days a week, so early that it was not yet light and staying so late that we missed the sun entirely. We would crouch in the shafts, and opening and closing small doors all day to allow the carts to pass through while keeping the noxious fumes trapped below. It was not the worst job in the mines, and my dad and mum had us in school on Saturdays, to learn our letters and numbers, and church on Sundays. We were the fortunate ones.

“But as trappers, we sat in the dark. And you could not risk sleeping, as you could get crushed by the passing coal carts or choke to death on the fumes. And I, Miss Blanchet, had the unfortunate predisposition to be afraid of the dark. My brothers all knew it, and they felt sorry for me, but we worked to put food on the table. When you grew a little more, you would be promoted to pulling or pushing the carts. But that was work that would make you bone-tired.

“One night I was straggling something fierce as we made our way home, and was so tired that I sat down and fell asleep on the side of the road. I gradually woke up and found myself draped over a horse. To this day, I remember the smell and the warmth, and the rhythm of it as that horse carried me home. It was the greatest feeling, secure and tranquil — everything that working coal was not. The horse was being led by a soldier, a cavalryman. He had found me there by the road, and hoisted me up on the saddle, and took me back towards our village.

“I tried to stay still, as I never wanted that ride to end. But the soldier realized I was awake, and after asking where my people lived, produced some of bread and a piece of cheese, which he handed over to me. He grinned at me in the dark, as I mumbled my thanks around bites of food, and resumed leading the horse, with me sitting in the saddle like a king.

Blanchet smiled kindly at him, “That is a good story. You deceived me in saying that your history is not so interesting. But you have not explained how it is you are here in Hertfordshire...”

“Well, I decided then and there that the cavalry was for me. For four long years, I worked in the mines and dreamed of red coats and horses as I scraped in the dark. The first time I tried to enlist, they laughed and threw me back as too small,” he smiled, “The next year I tried again, and although I was just shy of five feet and on

the wrong side of my teen years, they accepted me into the ranks. They trained me in Brighton, sent me to fight against the Americans alongside the Indians, and then brought me home again to fight against your countrymen,” he nodded by way of apology.

“I learned more about horses from those natives in the United States than in all my time amongst my fellow cavalymen. Until I met Colonel Fitzwilliam, that is. He is a perfect gentleman in the strongest sense of the word — knows his horses, treats all men as his equal, and I have been fighting alongside him since I returned from the Americas. Wherever he goes, I go too. Uniform or no.”

“That is quite a glowing endorsement, Sergeant Tate. I do not anticipate making the acquaintance of your colonel, but I am happy for you that you serve such an admirable master.”

“Aye, as am I, Miss Blanchet, as am I.”

The two exchanged a slight nod, and Tate returned his attention to the conversation being exchanged between Mr. Campbell and Mr. Nicholls, trying to pay half an ear to the conversation Blanchet had initiated with Miss Taylor on her other side. The ladies’ discussion was very mundane, coordinating colors for their respective mistresses’ accessories for the upcoming ball, to ensure that Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst would neither perfectly match, nor clash, but rather present a charming picture of well-coordinated perfection.

Tate reflected that it was not so much the content of the conversation that drew his attention, but rather the quiet and melodious tones of Miss Blanchet’s accented English. Dinner had been, by his count at least, quite a success.

Every Note a Perfect One

After entertaining the gentlemen for some time, Louisa excused herself, pleading fatigue and Bernard Hurst rose and escorted his wife to their quarters. Darcy, Bingley, and Fitzwilliam talked quietly by the fire, as Caroline continued at the pianoforte, practicing more than really playing for the gentlemen present, since the real exhibition had ended after the Hurst's retired.

"What are they about to be so tired anyway," Caroline mumbled to herself. Hurst claiming weariness she could well enough understand — one good ride would fatigue that gentleman, as his most strenuous activity whilst in town was holding a hand of cards. She sniffed. At least in the country he did hunt or ride each day. The same could not be said for her sister. Louisa, though possessing adequate equestrian skills preferred the carriage, and only rode when necessary. She did however, typically possess an abundance of energy and gleefully joined Caroline in full days of social calls, strolls down busy thoroughfares and fashionable parks, and dancing whenever possible.

Caroline gave up contemplating the Hursts and placed the sheets she had selected on the stand. She began absently playing the sonata, one that she knew and loved, and after a few moments, lost herself in the music. She did not notice the presence beside her, and started when a hand reached out to turn the page.

"I apologize, Miss Bingley. I did not intend to interrupt your concentration or your playing. Please...do continue. It is lovely, the piece you have selected. I meant only to learn the name of the piece so that I might entreat you to play it again while we are in company."

Miss Bingley offered him a genuine smile and began playing again. She returned her gaze to the keyboard, and said, "Haydn, number 59. In E flat. It is one of my favorites, and perfect for quiet moments," her tone suggesting that she did not appreciate the interruption of this particular quiet moment.

He slid onto the bench beside her, and Caroline was gratified that she did not miss a note, though her surprise was great in

finding the Colonel seated beside her at the pianoforte. She played for another few minutes, and though it demanded all of her patience and concentration, brought the piece to its natural conclusion, striking the keys to produce the last notes of the sonata with a bit more force than necessary.

As the sound vibrated in the air, she scooted as far as the bench allowed, which was not nearly enough, and turned to face him. "Pray tell, Colonel Fitzwilliam, how may I be of assistance?" She raised her chin and looked him straight in the eye, not shying from his presence, though she found herself remarkably unsettled by his continued proximity.

"I thought we might enjoy a duet," he smiled at her.

"A duet?"

"Yes, two people playing parts of the same piece. Just as you and your sister did earlier. Two players, one instrument, same song. You know, duet."

"I was not aware that you played, Colonel. I am all astonishment," Caroline smothered her heightened nerves with a veneer of haughty protectiveness. The very air between them was agitating...sent her heart pounding, and she felt that her cheeks must be enflamed — all of which felt like a betrayal. She despised this swirling sense of being unbalanced and willed herself to calm. She wanted to spring up from the bench, but forced herself to remain still, to not fidget, and to ignore the lure of the bodily warmth emanating from man beside her. She was keenly aware of the heat between them though he somehow maintained a respectable barrier of space between them on the crowded bench. Part of her wished that he would just pick her up and carry her off as he did in the stables... "No!" she squeezed her eyes shut and pursed her lips tightly, hunching down slightly, as if tensing all her muscles could force those thoughts and vague memories from her head.

"No?" he quietly repeated. "Then you do not favor playing a duet with me?" Colonel Fitzwilliam reached over her and slowly picked out the notes of a sprightly and well-recognized tune. As he did so, she felt the edge of his jacket brush over her arm, and she was once again overcome with the subtle scent of a forest on a summer day.

When he withdrew his arm, she felt disappointment and experienced a pang from deep inside, almost as if she had not eaten

in days. She glanced down at her stomach frowning, and then over at Charles and Darcy who were deep in conversation in front of the fire, inattentive and oblivious to the improper thoughts and actions being committed in that very room.

He reached over her again and repeated the opening, raising an eyebrow at his companion, invitation and dare issued all in one. Try as she might, Caroline was unable to form a response to the man though she felt as though she should give him a bit of a rebuff, forward as he was. But when she raised her eyes to his, she could not suppress the smile that broke out across her face. She felt light and airy.

The Colonel reached over her once more, this time deliberately bumping his arm against hers so that she rocked to the side as he plunked the melody out slowly and with some force all the while keeping his elbow planted against her upper arm. She could not suppress the low, throaty laugh that bubbled up from the deepest part of her and rolled out of her mouth. A giddiness firmly took hold, and she was transported back to her early time at Miss Ryall's, when making at least a small amount of mischief was the best part of any day. She straightened her back and raised her arm, stretching her fingers dramatically with all the solemnity of a concert musician, and took up the simple melody, adding more style and elaboration to his tune.

Colonel Fitzwilliam had been watching Caroline Bingley all evening. From the moment she descended like a hawk in pursuit of her prey, entering the drawing room as if floating on a current of air that she alone commanded. She was so perfectly contained, each movement she made measured and intentional, from her scrupulous manner of dining, where he was still not entirely sure how she had managed to actually clear any part of her plate — her bites were that minute, flatware and wine glass that unblemished — to her carefully coordinated serving of coffee and tea after dinner. Every step she took was made with deliberation and had an objective.

He admired her discipline. Rather than detracting from her appeal, he found he admired her sense of resolve, even if her strategy was inherently flawed. Her artifice clearly sent his cousin running in the opposite direction, but then again, Miss Bingley had placed Darcy in the role of prey, a prize to be won, a flag to be captured and paraded through town.

Darcy no more wanted to be stalked than he wanted to be the

center of any pageantry. More's the pity. *He* certainly would not mind being seen with the attention-commanding Miss Bingley on his arm, nor would he object to her pursuing him on her silent cat's paws in the forests of the night.

He deliberately displaced her on the bench of the pianoforte, moving her aside bodily with his hip as he claimed more than half the room on the slender seat, then retracting to a more civilized distance. After an entire evening spent watching her pursue his cousin, he wanted and needed to gauge her reaction to himself, and he had not been at all disappointed.

She may have convinced herself that she wanted Darcy, but that man did not stir the color in her cheeks or create a glow that rendered her uncommonly beautiful, softening the sharp features of Caroline's face and making her so very desirable.

The two went back and forth, Caroline clearly the more skilled player, but the Colonel keeping pace as she varied the tempo and then moved into another song without pause.

The laughter and frenetic playing garnered the attention of the others seated across the room. Bingley remarked, "It is most kind of your cousin to so dutifully entertain Caroline, Darcy. I do not recall the last time I heard such laughter from my sister."

Darcy turned in his seat to better observe the music makers. "Nor have I ever seen her make such an unguarded display. Richard is certainly at his charming best to evoke such a response in your sister, but I wonder is it wise for him to encourage her so?"

"You make it sound as if your cousin is courting my sister, Darcy! You think he is suddenly ready to throw off the scarlet coat and pick up the mantle of devoted husband? That hardly seems likely, from what I know of your cousin, and even if he were shopping for a bride, I do not imagine the Fitzwilliams would seek an alliance with the Bingley's. Let Caroline enjoy a little harmless flirtation. You must admit, it is rather refreshing to enjoy an evening's worth of conversation without her devoted attention to you. And it sounds as if they are genuinely enjoying one another's company....surprisingly so..." Bingley trailed off as he shifted his attention more fully to his sister and the Colonel.

The two seated at the pianoforte bounced with exertion and laughter as Caroline increased the tempo to a most riotous level. Colonel Fitzwilliam tenaciously tried to follow, but she was proved the quicker and was rewarded for her efforts with a series of

discordant notes. He dramatically struck the most off-key chord yet and barked out, "I yield!" as she simultaneously proclaimed, "I won!" and the two fell into peals of laughter.

From their seats across the room, Darcy turned back to an astonished Bingley and dryly replied, "Most refreshing to be sure, harmless I am not quite certain, but surprising...that is most definitely an appropriate description."

Caroline stood, her eyes shining and cheeks flushed from both her efforts and the sheer joy of abundant laughter. She raised her chin, adopted a stern expression, and looked down at Colonel Fitzwilliam. She stretched out her arm, and with her thumb extended outward, slowly rotated her hand to thumb's down.

"Was my playing so bad that you would publicly shame me?" he asked with feigned consternation and let his head drop to his chest, "I am wounded, m'lady."

Her heart melted as he repeated the silly phrase he had used in the stables. Was it just last night? But she answered him in kind, with a bit of cheek, "Your playing was unexpectedly skillful. My gesture is not meant as an indictment of your musical abilities, but rather a signal to the footman condemning you, my defeated warrior, to death. In the Roman style."

He gasped and rose, closing the distance between them, "Where are your feminine sensibilities? Your maidenly mildness?"

"You sir, suggested a duet, but then subjected me to something closer to a musical duel. Your fate was sealed when you so unceremoniously scooted me over on the bench. But you chose your weapon poorly, as the pianoforte is one of the strongest in my arsenal."

"Then I must rely on your sense of fair play. Would you consider a rematch? Horses at dawn?"

She laughed, "Again, you select poorly, Colonel. I am no slouch in the saddle."

"Horses at dawn it is. Prepare yourself, madam, my competitive spirit knows no bounds."

Caroline stepped away from him, "Get your rest then Colonel, as you will find in me a worthy adversary."

He watched appreciatively as she walked across the room, bid her brother and Darcy a good night, and exited the room. He could have sworn that she looked back at the last minute as the doors shut behind her. But perhaps that was wishful thinking. "I shall see

you in the morning, Caroline Bingley,” he said to himself.

“What was that, Richard?” asked his cousin from his chair by the fire, not bothering to turn his way.

“Nothing Darcy.” He moved to join them.

“That was quite a performance, cousin. I have not had the pleasure of hearing you play these last ten years at least. What inspiration struck you?” Darcy asked with raised brow.

“Is not a man allowed a moment of frivolity now and then? A bit of good fun, when touched by a creative muse?”

“Interesting choice of words,” remarked Bingley, “Just what muse touched you exactly, Colonel?”

He reddened, “I apologize Bingley, that sounded awful. There was no touching by or of muses, just a little amusement. Of the innocent variety. I find your sister to be a charming young woman.”

This remark occasioned looks of surprise from both members of his audience. “Come now, gentlemen. Miss Bingley is intelligent, accomplished, and most devoted to our comfort as our hostess. What is not charming?”

Now both men looked up at him with mirrored dubious expressions.

The Colonel held up his hands in surrender. “I am not blind to her faults. She does display a remarkably strong degree of single-mindedness in her pursuit of an advantageous match, which is admittedly misplaced...but surely you must both admire her unwavering concentration and sense of purpose. Most women of my acquaintance suffer by comparison. They echo the same bland sentiments...either discussing the weather or admiring my uniform all the while calculating how to wrangle an introduction to either my wealthy and handsome cousin or my brother, the future Earl. Your sister, Bingley, displays a refreshing determination and is at least obvious in her aim. She would make a formidable opponent on any battlefield.”

Both Bingley and Darcy nodded hesitantly, and after a moment of contemplation, Bingley answered, “Caroline just wants a bit of redirection perhaps...”

“I would be most willing to assist in redirecting Miss Bingley’s... uh, sense of purpose. Please inform me how I may contribute to such a shifting of concentration, as you say, Bingley.” He turned back to face his cousin, “In this, Richard, as in all else, I am your servant.”

“You make it sound as if I am devising a strategy, Darcy, which I am most definitely not. I was simply pointing out that Miss Bingley is an attractive lady with an admirable pertinacity-“

Darcy interrupted, “Come now, Richard, I do not believe that you put on your boots in the morning without having a plan for yourself. Admit it man, you are nothing if not a strategist.”

“I do not venture to approach my relationships as I do a battle, Darce. I will admit to finding Miss Bingley, your sister,” the Colonel nodded to Bingley, “attractive. But I thought that ladies rather than gentlemen were the ones to jump from admiration to love, and from love to matrimony, cousin,” he finished with a mock salute.

Darcy rolled his eyes.

“But since you have pressed the issue so early in my visit, may I ask, Bingley, are your sister’s affections previously engaged?”

Bingley nearly choked on his beverage.

“Forgive my cousin, Charles. He is as open as a book, and as blunt as a hammer,” Darcy chuckled, “but do please answer...I am curious as to what exactly your answer will be.”

Bingley had by this time recovered his composure, and slowly answered, “I would not say that her affections are engaged...but she hopes...she holds high aspirations, Colonel. She aspires to...well our parents, God bless them, placed a great deal of importance on establishing ourselves in society, Colonel. And Caroline is deeply committed to fulfilling those parental desires. It appears that she has decided...” Bingley hung his head, “decided that becoming Mrs. Fitzwilliam Darcy would be the most expeditious path to social triumph.”

The Colonel smiled broadly, “So what you are saying is I need but present her with a more efficient route, a more charming and alluring alternative to my lump of a cousin, and I may succeed in shifting her preference? If we should find that we suit each other, of course.”

Both Bingley and Darcy again looked dubious.

“Well you two clearly do not suit, Darcy. It should not be too difficult to make her realize that she would be bored to tears residing in the wilds of Derbyshire day in day out. Miss Bingley seems to want nothing but a little adventure, a little direction, and a little attention. Those I can offer.”

Both Bingley and Darcy looked somewhat surprised.

“And a magnificent estate, and a grand house in Town, and

unlimited pin money?" asked Darcy with skepticism, "No offense meant, Charles, nor to you Richard."

"No. None taken, my friend," Bingley answered first. "Caroline has displayed nothing to you but her more mercenary tendencies. I wholly understand your point of view on the matter."

The Colonel crossed his arms and looked from one man to the other. "Yes, she obviously enjoys elevated status and fine things — who does not — but I believe that Miss Bingley has greater depth than either of you are giving her credit for possessing."

Darcy and Bingley looked at one another and shrugged.

"The path is clear, Colonel. You have my blessing to pursue my sister, but I must ask you in all sincerity, why her? I have met your mother, and it strikes me that Lady Matlock would look upon this union with less enthusiasm. You could choose from any number of more well-positioned heiresses."

This time the Colonel shrugged, "As I said before, you are both somewhat precipitate. It has yet to be determined whether or not Miss Bingley and I do suit one another, and I thank you for offering your blessing to explore that possibility. To address your concerns, it is simple, really. Something in her speaks to something in me. Neither of you may understand this, and in truth, having spent only the briefest time in her company, I do not truly understand it myself, having never experienced anything of this nature before. But in my experience, when something calls to that silent part of me, I had best listen."

He gave them a very sincere look and the room fell quiet. The moment was broken by the shifting of burned wood as it settled to the bottom of the grate in the fireplace. The two seated stood, and in unspoken agreement, they all quit the room. The gentlemen bade one another a good night at the top of the stairs and continued to their separate rooms, each lost to their own thoughts.

Horses at Dawn

From beneath warm covers, Caroline immediately awoke as a servant girl quietly padded into her room to light the wood laid on the andirons the night before. She watched for a moment as the girl went about her work, and then called out to her before she could leave to her next task.

“You there. Girl.”

The girl started at being called, breaking the quiet in her routine, and reddened as she was unused to being addressed by the family in residence. She dropped an awkward curtsey.

Caroline smiled slightly at the girl’s obvious discomfort in being addressed, and gentled her voice, “What is your name?”

“Molly, ma’am.” She kept her eyes down.

“Molly, then. And how long have you been at Netherfield, Molly?”

“Just these two weeks, ma’am.”

“Ah. I see. You are very efficient, Molly.” She gestured to the fire which had grown respectably and was beginning to heat the cool air of the room.

The girl smiled tentatively.

“Would you be so kind as to ask Miss Blanchet to attend me as soon as she is able, Molly? And I would like a pot of tea from the kitchen. And two whole apples.”

“Yes ma’am.”

“Thank you, Molly.”

The young girl bobbed in place again and exited the room quickly, as if afraid that Caroline might speak to her again.

Caroline stretched like a cat and swung her legs out from under the covers and placed each foot into the slippers carefully arranged on the carpet beside her bed. She stood and quickly shrugged into her robe. Blanchet entered and smiled at her mistress.

“Good morning, Blanchet.”

“Good morning, Miss Caroline.”

“I am sorry to require you so early, Blanchet, but I want go riding this morning, and I need your assistance in dressing.”

"Yes Miss Caroline. Do you prefer the green or the red today?"

"The red. I believe it shows off Titania's coat to her best advantage," smiled Caroline.

"I believe you are correct, Miss Caroline, but why you favor your horse so is beyond my comprehension. Most ladies dress to their own advantage," Blanchet answered with a cluck of her tongue.

"Most ladies are not blessed with so fine a horse as Titania, Blanchet. Besides, the green jacket is so fitted that I feel I cannot breathe when I am truly exerting myself. But I will conceded to your usual preference and finish the ensemble with the black hat."

Blanchet smiled at her mistress. "Yes ma'am. An excellent choice."

Caroline laughed, "Your choice, you mean, Blanchet. I know that you like the simplicity of the top hat to the plumed cap that was sent to us with this habit.

Blanchet's smile broadened, "As you say, Miss Caroline, but I offer my apologies for making my own preferences so obvious to you."

"Not at all, dear Blanchet. I value highly value your opinions as they are invariably correct, and know that my recent more sophisticated looks are due to your good judgement." Caroline reached up and squeezed the hand that was braiding her hair. "You, Blanchet, are a wonder."

Blanchet pinned the arrangement of braids to the nape of Caroline's neck, and stepped to the wardrobe to retrieve the finishing piece for the ensemble, holding the hat aloft for her mistresses' approval.

Caroline's delighted smile was approval enough.

"I replaced the absurd amount of netting in the back with this one piece in front that is heavily starched. It will protect your eyes from any turf that your Titania kicks up with her hooves, as I know that I cannot persuade you to hold a more sedate pace."

"This is brilliant, Blanchet! And I adore this pom in the rear. Just the right touch," Caroline enthused as she stroked the puff of soft dyed black fur stitched on the back of the hat. "Far superior to what was sent to us by Mr. Fox."

Blanchet scoffed, "Mr. Fox knows little about dressing a woman. Or rather he knows little about dressing a woman who rides her horse with greater speed and skill than most men. The pom will

stay in place and not distract you, but softens the look. My mistress will look the proper woman.”

“Thank you, Blanchet.” Caroline finished her last sip of tea, and Blanchet pinned the hat at an angle that would keep it on Caroline’s head as she galloped afield. She placed an apple in each pocket of the skirt, and eagerly headed to the stable.

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Caroline rounded the corner of the path and was greeted by the site of Colonel Fitzwilliam gently stroking the Titania’s neck and quietly speaking in her ear. Though she could not make out the words, his tone was gentle and encouraging, and the horse was plainly enjoying his calm attention.

He stood between his own mount and Caroline’s Titania, but when her boots crunched on the gravel as she walked towards them, he patted Titania one last time, and stepped forward to greet Caroline.

“I was not certain that you would appear.”

Caroline scoffed, “You expected me to back down, to run away from your challenge? You do not know me, Colonel, if you thought I would be easily intimidated.”

“You are prepared, then, to meet me on the field of honor?”

“Lead the way,” she answered with an arch smile.

If her groom noticed that the Colonel’s hands lingered a moment longer than necessary as he assisted Miss Bingley to her

saddle, the boy made no indication, but Caroline was sharply aware of his touch as his hands encircled her waist and then effortlessly lifted her to her seat. He moved so deftly that the waiting groom could hardly have observed the movements as Colonel Fitzwilliam's hands traveled smoothly from the firm hold on her waist down her thigh, as he assured himself that her leg was secured in the pommel of the saddle and then down to her opposite ankle and foot, placing it expertly in the stirrup.

She felt as though the routinely comfortable riding habit was suddenly constricting her ability to take a full breath, and wondered at the sensations stirred by his touch. Her groom handed her the reins and she watched as the Colonel impressively gained his own seat in one fluid motion and directed his horse down the drive. He looked over his shoulder, and asked, "Well then, shall we ride?" as he gestured to the expansive field in front of them.

Caroline tapped her horse's side with her riding cane, and returned his rather devastating smile as she passed him, "How about to that lone tree at the end of the field?"

He could not help but snort, before he recovered and caught up with her. "Are you suggesting we race, Miss Bingley? As a gentleman and as a soldier, I do not make a habit of competing with ladies."

"Well then, Colonel," she replied with some sharpness, "instead of considering it a race, you could consider it a matter of simply keeping up with me. Which should not be too difficult, considering that I am just a lady."

"I did not intend to slight you..." he stopped mid-sentence as Caroline abruptly turned off the drive, and with a flick of the reins, shot out across the expanse of green, and took the first fence at impressive speed.

"Damnation, woman!" the Colonel murmured and then broke out in a broad grin as he watched Caroline wheel her horse around and repeat his earlier sweeping gesture of invitation, adding a short nod of her head.

He turned his horse and was by her side in a thrice, though landing a bit harder than he had intended.

"Do you not think your brother might object to our treatment of his lawn, Miss Bingley?" She did not so much as glance back at the dry turf, torn and dislodged by horse hooves.

"Come now Colonel, we must give the groundskeepers some

occupation in these winter months. That fence was just begging to be jumped, was it not? And I feel that I must occasionally give Titania her head.” She leaned low, patted her horse’s neck, and cooed, “We all need to run free from time to time, don’t we girl.”

Colonel Fitzwilliam nodded to himself, “Yes, that is a sentiment I can appreciate. I apologize for underestimating your skill and your spirit. I shall not commit the same mistake twice.”

She gracefully dipped her head in acknowledgement of his words, but remained silent, stroking her horses neck.

He pointed to a landmark in the distance, “And if I am not mistaken, I see before us another fence that asks to be cleared. Are you ready, Miss Bingley?”

At that the two riders charged forward, flying across the field, one edging out the other for a moment and then exchanging positions, well-matched in horsemanship, in spirit, and in drive.

Special Delivery

Caroline sighed and looked at Lydia Bennet in disbelief. Can she truly be this imperceptive? She turned her eye longingly to the ormolu clock on the mantle, willing the minute hand to move faster. How had the seating arrangements gone so wrong?

She somehow found herself shipwrecked between the two youngest Bennets *again* with Mr. Darcy likewise stuck in place across the room from her.

“He may as well be in Spain,” she muttered to herself. The situation presented no opportunity to impress him with her clear superiority over the present company. In short, the visit was an incredible waste of a new *Costume Parisien*. She looked at her hands neatly folded in her lap and admired the tiny repeating pattern of Turkey red rose buds on the skirt of her dress. How delicate it looked compared to the heavier muslin of the Bennet girls’ gowns beside her.

When she looked up, she caught Catherine Bennet’s watchful eye, and realized the girl had certainly seen her staring at her sister’s dress. She may have even heard her slip about Mr. Darcy. That girl nodded her head as if in appreciation.

Further surprising her, Miss Kitty drew a breath and nodded, “Your dress is positively beautiful. I have never seen such fine cotton fabric, but I believe I saw a very similar gown in a fashion plate in last month’s copy of *Belle Assemblée*. You must have a very skilled seamstress. It is such a fine rendition. Do you have the matching bonnet?”

“Why, yes, yes I do.” Caroline waited for Miss Kitty to interrupt but was greeted instead by an enthusiastic, wide-eyed nod, and so she continued, “My lady’s maid serves as my seamstress. She is remarkably talented. I am most fortunate to have her.”

Kitty also had a talent for drawing. Had either of her parents cared enough to develop this talent, Caroline was sure that Miss Kitty would prove quite the artist.

Caroline’s eyes returned to the clock, which indicated that they had been sitting above twenty minutes now. She tried to catch

Charles' attention, but his eyes were firmly fixed on Jane Bennet. She could not prevent the pout from creeping into her soul — she felt entirely stymied. She looked around the room, and noted that while that odious parson person, Mr. Callings...no Collins...tried desperately to make an impression about Mr. Darcy, the latter had no reservations about ignoring the former. Darcy was thoroughly ignoring him in favor of staring at Elizabeth Bennet. Presumably he was held captive by her damnably fine eyes. She really did have amazingly expressive eyes. She could hold entire conversations with those eyes. How annoying.

Mr. Collins had wedged himself between Mr. Darcy and Miss Eliza on the sofa. His head swiveled from side to side as he clearly wanted to pay both of his companions equal attention and could not decide to whom he should address his statements. It was a dizzying display.

“And then dear Wicky asked me to dance the supper set with him, and of course I said yes, and I just know that *everyone* will be jealous when they see us looking so *perfect* together at the ball. Wickham had to ask that freckled Miss King to dance the first, because he feels so sorry for her now being without her parents and all, but I just *know* that he would prefer to be dancing the first set with me, because he did tell me that I am the most entertaining and best company...” Lydia kept up her oration.

Caroline felt her patience wearing thin, she had no desire to watch Darcy silently brood over anyone, and her brother's puppy dog behavior was even worse. She was about to interrupt that cozy tête-à-tête when she spied that across the room Charles had finally produced the formal invitation to Lydia Bennet's Ball, and placed the card in the Bennet Matron's pudgy fingers. *Finally! Now they might depart.*

Mrs. Bennet waved the invitation aloft as if she were surrendering and her frantic profusions of gratitude silenced the whole room, even Loud Lydia. “Oh Mr. Bennet!” screeched his bride, “You must see what fine paper the Bingley's used for their invitation, and SUCH beautiful handwriting! Have you ever seen such even script and just look at this flourish! Why, it looks exactly like a love bird.” Each of Mrs. Bennet's comments were punctuated with excessive flattery, but Caroline was not immune to a compliment, especially when the compliment was issued in the presence of Mr. Darcy.

She turned in her seat, and offered a very formal thank you to Mrs. Bennet and then glanced towards the sofa to see if Mr. Darcy was taking notice, whereby she witnessed something extraordinary that made the entire visit worthwhile.

Mr. Collins had dropped down on bended knee in front of a very red-faced Miss Eliza Bennet. He snatched her hand up, and held it to his heaving chest, and asked her quite loudly if she would make him the happiest of men and promise him that she would agree to stand up with him...for the opening dance at the ball.

Caroline's careful equanimity was torn asunder — she knew not whether to be bitterly disappointed that Mr. Collins had not actually proposed to Eliza Bennet or to be wholly amused by the absurdity of the sweaty clergyman who was even now fighting to keep hold of Eliza's hand.

She cared not that Mr. Darcy had failed to register the elegance of her invitation, as she reveled in the emotions playing out on that man's face. Darcy was leaning as far away from the couple as possible, but Mr. Collins' genuflection had trapped Mr. Darcy in place. Mr. Darcy's expression vacillated between disgust and horror, and Caroline was thrilled.

As for Eliza, well, she almost felt sorry for that woman as her discomfort was obvious and acute. Elizabeth attempted to reclaim her hand while holding the leaning Mr. Collins at bay. She squeaked out a somewhat panicked, "Yes!" and then, "Mr. Collins I beg you to return to your seat. It is simply a request for a dance, not a request for my..." and then her face went from pink to white as she bit back her comment.

Eliza Collins. How well that sounds, thought Caroline with no little spite, but instead of tormenting Elizabeth found herself interrupting the ridiculous scene, "Mr. Collins, perhaps you should share your most beneficent kindnesses with your other cousins. Miss Eliza is most deserving of your attentions to be sure, but I feel that as both a man of the cloth and as a man so comfortably situated with such a generous patroness...well, could not all of your cousins benefit from being seen dancing with such a man?

Collins toady smile stretched across the entirety of his face as he beamed at the compliment. "Of course you are right, Miss Bingley, and so kind to say so." He finally released Miss Elizabeth's hand, which she snatched back with alacrity, holding it protectively within the tight clasp of her other hand. The paunchy parson rose

from his knee in an awkward, wobbling sort of way, and swiftly walked up to where Miss Bennet sat in quiet conversation with Charles, unaware of the *honor* she was about to receive.

Mr. Collins made a dipping motion as if he were to take a knee again, but then aborted the plan at the last moment, and so the motion became more of a lurching, partial curtsy. Caroline watched with glee as again a hand was seized and another reluctant Bennet sister committed a dance to the ungainly ecclesiastic.

Having secured a dance each with Eliza, Jane, Mary, who Caroline noticed was the only sister to seem pleased with the application, and Kitty, Mr. Collins then met his match in Miss Lydia.

Lydia was not one to spare the feelings of another, and visibly took great pleasure as she informed her Cousin Collins that her dance card was already full. She forcefully pulled her hand from his hold and held it aloft, then proceeded to tick off the dances on her fingers, exuberantly naming off each gentleman with whom she was to partner. Caroline took advantage of Lydia's soliloquy to determine what the rest of the room thought of the ill-mannered girl's recitation and the entire savory scene in general.

Darcy's eyes had narrowed and jaw clenched at the mention of Lieutenant Wickham while Miss Elizabeth sat stock still on the other side of the sofa with her hands held firmly against her lap. Next to them, Miss Mary occupied the piano bench and her eyes were also shooting daggers and her pursed lips told of disapproval, which Caroline surmised was directed more at her sister's vanity than at her cousin's lack of sense.

Charles was flanked by sweet Jane and Mrs. Bennet. As soon as Mr. Collins had moved on to his next victim, Charles had turned again to resume his quiet conversation with Jane, and they were apparently lost to the rest of the company in their own pathetic world of two. *This mooncalf behavior has to come to an end*, Caroline paused momentarily until Mrs. Bennet, with eyes aglow, clapped her hands and squealed, "Oh Lydia, I knew you could not be so lively and beautiful for nothing! Of course your dance card is already full, and not four days before the ball. Why I remember when I liked a redcoat very well myself, and it is quite right that such a spirited and blooming young lady should be so popular..."

Caroline could not hold back the snort that accompanied her eye roll, and immediately covered it by coughing into her hand, but not before her indiscretion had garnered the attention of everyone in

the room. She feigned another cough, this one stronger and of greater duration, until Kitty Bennet — bless her — took the empty tea cup from Caroline's hands and patted her on the back quietly saying, "I understand, Miss Bingley. I suffer terribly from coughs. It can be quite embarrassing."

Caroline looked up to see disapproval etched on her brother's face and so quickly shifted her eyes away from him to the door, where she spied Mr. Bennet. He leaned against the doorjamb with twinkling eyes and had the audacity to give her a wink as he slowly nodded his head at her with a wry grin. That he had observed her faux pas, that damnably uncontrollable snort, was apparent. That he shared in her amusement was surprising. Caroline did not know if their shared estimations made her like the man more, or if his rather cynical view of his own daughters made her like him less, but she was at least thankful that he had not taken offense.

Mr. Bennet cleared his throat, drawing the attention of most of the room. Caroline was entirely grateful when in a tone both clear and strong Mr. Bennet said, "Gentlemen!" silencing Mrs. Bennet, Lydia, and Mr. Collins who were all holding forth on the merits of one so young being so engaged at a private ball with varying and vociferous opinions.

He continued in a slightly lower voice, "Gentlemen, I understand that your visit is drawing to a close. Perhaps you would like to join me in my book room to discuss my plans for the northwest pasture, since it adjoins your southernmost holdings, Mr. Bingley. I am particularly interested in your experience with drainage, Mr. Darcy, as I heard from Mr. Goulding that you have implemented some very progressive designs on your estate."

Darcy stood with a look of relief and offered the room a curt bow before stepping to join Mr. Bennet. That gentlemen cleared his throat once more, and Charles reluctantly stood and bowed over Miss Bennet's hand, "I look forward to opening the ball with you, Miss Bennet. I shall be the envy of the county." He flashed her a brilliant, toothy smile before retreating with Darcy.

Mr. Collins took advantage of the quiet to offer, "Perhaps you ladies would appreciate a reading of Fordyce..." but was immediately cut off once more by Mr. Bennet.

"Mr. Collins, I believe that as heir of Longbourn, you too would benefit from learning more about drainage. Do join us, sir." Such a direct request for his company could not be denied and so Collins

shuffled out of the room following Darcy and Bingley.

Mr. Bennet turned back to the room once more and addressed Caroline directly, "Miss Bingley. I understand from your brother that you have several more invitations to deliver. I will not keep your party overlong. I believe another ten minutes should be ample time for Mr. Darcy to give us a brief sketch of his expertise in the removal of excess water. Mrs. Bennet, please ask Hill to interrupt us if we should fail to reappear after such time has passed." He flashed a wry smile, "And perhaps you should offer our guest a glass of water. She appears to have a tickle in her throat."

And with that both Mr. and Mrs. Bennet left the sitting room. In the absence of parental supervision, Lydia lost no time in coercing her sister Kitty into accompanying her into Meryton to procure new trimmings for her ballgown. The two departed in a wave of flouncing skirts, dancing steps and the boisterous laughter of the youngest Bennet.

Mary moved to the now vacant seat beside her sister and opened her copy of Fordyce's Sermons, as Jane sat serenely looking out the window. Caroline closed her eyes for a moment, savoring the relative tranquility and was again surprised by a Bennet, as she found Elizabeth Bennet standing directly in front of her.

"Though my sisters may feel differently, I find I must thank you, Miss Bingley, for your timely suggestion to my cousin. I feared that he had experienced some sort of paralysis and was unable to stand or relinquish my hand." she said with the same twinkling eyes as her father, "I am grateful that was not the case, but imagine that were it not for your intervention, he could have suffered irreparable harm had he remained thus."

Caroline felt a broad smile take hold of her features, and quickly extinguished the amiable look. "I have never witnessed such marked attention and determination, Miss Eliza. I cannot account for what caused me to interrupt the scene, but I am glad I caused you no pain."

"On the contrary," replied Elizabeth with a raised brow, "You saved my hand from potential permanent damage." She turned her head and blushed slightly, "But most importantly, you saved me from further mortification at the hands of my own family."

Miss Bingley stepped in, "Really Miss Eliza, it was nothing. In truth I do not know what came over me to interfere in your-"

Elizabeth interrupted, "May I speak openly with you, Miss

Bingley?" At that ladies hesitant nod, Elizabeth Bennet continued in a voice so low Caroline had to lean in to hear, "I hold no illusions about the impression my family makes to the world at large. I am decidedly aware of each mercenary remark my mother makes, every instance where my younger sister puts herself forward inappropriately, and each wrong note that issues from the mouth of my well-meaning sister Mary, when her enthusiasm over-reaches her talent," Elizabeth shifted her gaze to the side, "and even my dear father's tendency to offer clever comments when a guiding word would be most expedient."

She returned her gaze to Miss Bingley, who in turn searched Elizabeth's face with disbelief at such frank discussion. "Of course," she smiled around her words, "I also plainly see that you do not approve of me or *anyone* in my family," she strongly emphasized anyone. "I do not expect to be admitted to your circle, or to Mr. Darcy's...as anyone who offers *no conversation, no style, no taste, no beauty* could never aspire to such lofty heights."

Miss Bingley's eyes widened to impossible proportions.

"Yes, I did indeed hear you speak those words that night at Netherfield as I left the dining room to tend to my sister. Neither have the looks that you and Mr. Darcy level at me gone unnoticed." At this Miss Bingley furrowed her brow, but Elizabeth continued matching Miss Bingley's furrow by raising her own brow as if to offset such a contracted appearance.

"Come now, you do not need to pretend to like me. You and Mr. Darcy have made it clear that you look at me only to find fault, and that you have both found me to be the sorriest excuse of an accomplished lady. You, Miss Bingley, have been refreshingly direct in your treatment of me, and most consistent. You have not offered *me* any degree of *false* friendship," she continued bitingly, "but that picture of kind serenity you see over my shoulder is something rare and beautiful. *She*," Elizabeth tilted her head slightly to indicate her sister Jane who was in quiet conversation now with Mary, "sees the best in everyone. And she believes that you are a charming, elegant *lady* - a true friend. Someone with whom she shares a mutual sense of caring admiration. I beg of you not to break her heart, not to shatter her belief in the natural good of people in general, and in those who offer her the hand of friendship in particular."

Elizabeth finished her speech with conspicuously shining eyes, and Caroline saw at once that she was genuine in her address,

inappropriately familiar though it was. The two ladies stood in silence, Elizabeth searching her with an intensity that was quite uncomfortable, while she, Caroline Arabella Bingley was at an utter loss for words. No one, outside of her sister Louisa, had ever spoken to her in such a direct manner.

She broke Elizabeth's stare, and hazarded a glance at beautiful Jane Bennet. Jane sat patiently discussing the deeper meanings her sister found in the dull and vaguely insulting sermons of James Fordyce. Yes. Jane Bennet was entirely too good. Better than Elizabeth — that was certain, better than Caroline, and even kinder than her dearest Louisa who, though not as biting as Caroline, did enjoy sharing with her those deliciously scandalous scraps of chatter to be gleaned from their many social calls. She lingered there, looking at Jane, and realized that Elizabeth was right. Jane Bennet deserved better.

The brief moment of self-examination made Caroline wince, and the corners of Elizabeth's mouth turned up ever so slightly in response to her discomfort.

Caroline shook her head lightly and cocked it to one side looking slightly bemused, "Miss Bennet is all kindness...it is most extraordinary. I concede that you do your sister honor with your speech," she narrowed her eyes at Eliza Bennet, "still your impertinence knows no bounds, and for one who prides herself in being a studier of character...well, I find your observations delightfully entertaining."

Elizabeth looked confused.

At that moment the gentlemen reappeared, and Caroline found herself surprised yet again, as Mr. Darcy emerged from Mr. Bennet's book room with a smile on his face and engaged in a most animated conversation with their host.

"Apparently good drainage is almost as delightful as an afternoon of character study," Miss Bingley made the most shallow of curtsies to Elizabeth and stepped to the window seat, where she offered the warmest leave-taking to Jane Bennet.

A slightly more subdued Mrs. Bennet also reappeared and gratitude and good-byes were exchanged by almost all, as the Bingley carriage was brought around for their return to Netherfield Hall.

* * *

In the carriage, Caroline stared out the window at the fields and trees beyond, lost in her own thoughts. Charles rolled his eyes in her direction and shrugged at his friend, both men grateful for a quiet moment.

Each man left Longbourn with a sense of deep satisfaction. Charles Bingley had finally managed to deliver his invitation in person, with the additional compliment of having handed it to the Mistress of the Longhorn himself. Mrs. Bennet's response was almost alarmingly enthusiastic, but Charles readily excused such excesses and was simply pleased that with such a small gesture he could bring so much joy to the mother of the most beautiful lady with the kindest disposition of his acquaintance. He had enjoyed the almost exclusive conversation of his angel, Jane Bennet for nearly twenty minutes, and he had secured her hand for not only the opening set, but also the supper set. Would it were allowed, he would have also asked for the final set, but that was simply not done. He sighed with immense satisfaction and leaned back against the seat cushions lost in thoughts of being to hold Jane Bennet in his arms, if only in the dance.

She will look into my eyes with that soft glow that she only gives when she looks at me, and I will feel her warmth as we circle around the room - dare I have the musicians play a waltz...

The loud sigh from her brother drew Caroline's attention and garnered him a very expressive eye roll, as she well recognized the source of his dreamy expression. She turned back to the window in disgust. A man should not be so...so...silly.

Across the seat from the Bingleys, Darcy was a man divided. On one hand, he was flushed with a modest sort of self-satisfaction in hearing that his recent efforts at engaging the local gentry had succeeded. Not only had Mr. Goulding praised his knowledge of advanced drainage practices to any of his neighbors that would listen, but the man had also praised him as a worthy addition to the neighborhood and a good sort of fellow after all. Mr. Bennet had

gleefully repeated Mr. Goulding's more personal comment to Darcy, in what Darcy could only imagine was an attempt to provoke him, as in the telling he had emphasized the *after all*.

Because he had experienced a previous taste of that man's peculiar manners, he realized that Mr. Bennet needed a mark, an object to make ridiculous with his sharp wit, and so Darcy offered up his Aunt Catherine's ridiculous parson as a sacrificial lamb. From that act, Darcy derived no satisfaction - Mr. Collins was too easy a target. All he had needed to do was to include Mr. Collins in the conversation by asking him his opinion on a subject about which he could not possibly be familiar and let him go — Collins held forth how *Lady Catherine de Bourgh* would drain her fields in the nothing but the best way for five minutes at least. It was painful to listen and more painful to know that his officious aunt had retained such an unread toady to serve as her spiritual guide, but there he was, warts and all. And Mr. Bennet had greatly enjoyed his laugh, and not at Darcy's expense.

Bennet was a mixture of odd parts, to be certain. He took delight in encouraging the absurd comments of his nephew rather than moderating the man. Collins was the worst sort of sycophant and deserved no better than he got, Darcy mused, especially when he clearly had the appalling pretensions of aspiring to wed the magnificent Miss Elizabeth Bennet.

And magnificent she was. Now there was a beauty to provoketh thieves sooner than gold!

Darcy signed deeply, as he turned his focus to the other hand, that which kept him awake through the wee hours — the troubling, captivating, ravishing Miss Elizabeth. Would that she were well-connected, well-dowered, or at least free of those howling women she called family. As is, she would never be accepted by his uncle the Earl. She would never be accepted by his shrewish Aunt Catherine either, who against his every protestation still held out hope that he would wed his poor cousin Anne. That would never happen. Both he and Anne had made it abundantly clear...but Lady Catherine de Bourgh chose not to hear that which ran contrary to her own plans. Aunt Catherine would be most displeased with him making a match with anyone who was not her daughter. But this situation...making a match with a country girl of limited standing would be a bitter draught to swallow for any of his relatives, even the more reasonable ones.

Oh that the path were unobstructed to pay court to lively, lovely Elizabeth Bennet! I should have asked her to dance. I should have asked her to save each and every one of her dances just for me from now until eternity.

The uncharacteristic sigh from Fitzwilliam Darcy drew Caroline's attention, though she would have been better served by tending to her own distractions. She noted the same starry-eyed, pining look on Darcy's face that she had seen numerous times on her brother's visage recently, the very look he now displayed. She could not help the quiet sound of disgust that spilled forth from her mouth, from her very soul. That little indiscretion was lost to her carriage companions, as they were quite lost to their own reveries.

Men! Besotted, boorish fools...all of them! What was it about these Bennet women?

Chapter Twenty-One -Rain for Days

Caroline sat with her back to the door, uncharacteristically draped across the back of the chaise, turned towards the window, chin propped up on her crossed forearms.

Rain. More rain.

It had rained the entirety of yesterday, and today the grey clouds gave no indication that they planned on breaking. Steady, dull rain. If it were going to rain, it could at least whip itself into a truly fearsome storm that would just as quickly dissolve and give way to clear skies.

She could not risk taking Titania out in such weather, although she longed for another exhilarating ride.

The Colonel was truly in his element on a horse. It was a breathtaking sight. When he rode, it was as if he was one with his mount. Fluid, fearless, fast. Fun.

She pushed away and flopped onto her back, forearm now covering her eyes, the very picture of a Gothic heroine in distress. Her lips smiled beneath the arm, then grimaced. *Who am fooling? Myself? Never.* The good Colonel was alluring without a doubt. But a penniless cavalryman did not fit into her future. Her dowry was impressive by any standards, but would not buy her a Netherfield Hall, much less a Pemberley. She bit off a quiet laugh tinged with bitterness, as she considered that her twenty-thousand would not even buy her a Longbourn.

No, she needed respectability and a home more than she needed Striking in a Saddle, even if he was the most entertaining of gentlemen. And the most absent of gentlemen, she noted with a huff. Gone all day yesterday and the better part of the day before, she was beginning to think that perhaps he was not a gentleman at all, but rather a wolf in a uniform - for what military matters could be so pressing with the -shire Militia in a backwater like Meryton?

After their thrilling ride together, the Colonel had declined her brother's invitation to accompany them on their call to deliver the

all important invitation to the Bennet family. Not that she could blame him for absenting himself from that odious errand. Upon their return however, she had been informed by Mrs. Nicholls that the Colonel would not be joining them for dinner, as he was obligated to dine with the officers that evening.

Neither Charles nor Darcy had appeared concerned when Colonel Fitzwilliam had yet to return when it was time to retire for the evening, but she did note that they exchanged a knowing look.

The next morning at breakfast, the Colonel made a late appearance, then excused himself from their company for the day, claiming business with Colonel Forster and Captain Carter. She had watched him ride off in the rain, the collar of his grey wool coat buttoned up tall and hat pulled low against the rain. As he moved farther from the house, she realized that with him left the hope of any diversion that day, as she absolutely refused to join Charles and Mr. Darcy in visiting Sir William Lucas. Who would go out in such weather to sit in a room with Sir William and his brood?

When he disappeared from view, she continued to peer into the cloudy landscape. The only sounds were the plunking of fat rain drops against the window and the tinkling of Louisa's bracelets as she played with her jewelry. Behind her, most predictably Darcy would sit with a book, Hurst would be fighting nodding off, and Charles would be fidgeting as he pretended to read.

When she turned, the cozy domestic scene played out exactly as she had envisioned, and she excused herself from the company to meet with Mrs. Nicholls about dinner. It was then that Darcy informed her that they would be five at table, as his cousin would dine in Meryton.

She looked at him with dissatisfaction, then beamed a smile his way, "Of course. He has important military business to attend to and no time to keep us company. Thank you, Mr. Darcy, I shall inform Mrs. Nicholls of the arrangement. And Mr. Darcy, you will be delighted, I am sure, to hear that tonight we will enjoy that apple pudding we had last Michaelmas at Pemberley. Your Mrs. Reynolds, well your cook I suppose, was so kind as to share the receipt with me, and Charles was generous in securing some Calvados for the sauce."

Darcy returned her questionably sincere smile with one of his own, "Thank you, Miss Bingley. That is good news indeed. The Colonel will be sorry to have missed such a treat, as it is also one of

his favorites. Perhaps I will write of it to Georgiana after dinner. Thank you," he finished with a curt nod.

She turned and left the room, feeling as though he had dismissed her, as if she were his pupil. An annoying pupil at that. After dinner, Darcy would write his letter, and the Hurst's would again retire early, and then Charles and Darcy would play billiards. All of these things unfolded, the household following the routine established in the first week of their residence in country. Insufferably dull company, all.

On impulse she had, for some reason beyond words, requested that one of the footman have Cook prepare a single serving of the remaining pudding for the absent Colonel. And after the others retired, she had awaited Colonel Fitzwilliam's return, piece of cold apple pudding with congealed caramel sauce sitting on the table beside the same chaise on which she now reclined.

She had felt that delicious sensation that came with embarking on an act of some daring - a fool's errand, a headstrong, impudent and imprudent act. What business had she of waiting up for a man that, while intriguing and admittedly very appealing in many ways, was not for her? But like jumping a high fence or frolicking in the sea as young girl, engaging in imprudent behavior was deeply diverting.

Late Night Snack

Caroline experienced a moment of confusion upon finding herself propped up in a chair by the dying fire, alone in a darkened room. She suddenly snapped to a heightened awareness of two things - the lateness of the hour and the soft sounds of someone opening the door at the front entrance. Beside her, the candle wick hissed in a dangerously large pool of wax next to the drooping dessert. "Ooh!" she exclaimed as she hopped from her seat and stepped to grab a fresh taper from the new candles already placed in the room by an industrious house maid.

She held touched the new candle to the nearly extinguished one, and was rewarded with a bright glow as the other guttered. Her relief at not having to bump around in the dark was short lived as she contemplated the candle in her hand, unsure if she should find another holder or stuff it into the melted wax and risk an overflow. Deciding to risk a spill, she bent to place the candle in the holder and intent upon her task, nearly jumped from her slippers when a voice called her name.

"Miss Bingley," the Colonel called out loudly, causing that woman to jump.

She hissed and righted the candle she held, too late to stop the stream of wax from flowing over her hand. "Colonel Fitzwilliam," she returned, "you startled me. I had somehow fallen asleep, and then I had to light a fresh candle and it, or rather I need to place it in this holder...ouch!" she looked down as more wax dripped onto her hand.

He stepped more fully into the room, "My apologies! I did not mean to startle you," he said more quietly, "but I was in truth surprised myself to find anyone awake." He stood before her now, "Here," he took her hands in his own, and gently removed the candle, "I must more fully make amends...you have burned your hand on my account." He carelessly replaced the candle in its holder without relinquishing her hand, the still-liquid wax welling over the edges and onto the table top.

Caroline stood mesmerized as he brought her hand close to his

face to more closely inspect it in the dark room. He tenderly peeled back the hardened stream of wax from her skin and blindly tossed it towards the candle, and raised her hand closer still, turning it to follow the mark left by the wax.

With painful slowness he bent over her hand and pressed his lips upon the reddened skin, turning her hand over and leaving a trail of soft kisses to her palm. Caroline gasped and felt as if her whole body blushed if such a thing were possible. She tried to calmly remove her hand from his grasp, but he refused to let go. She breathed in sharply, and smelled the unpleasant tang of cigars and ale. Her eyes narrowed, "You sir, are drunk! You have no business touching me so."

"Drunk?" he asked, "Oh I am far from drunk. I am actually just perfect. Just the perfect amount of drunk. Were I to have just one more drink...nay, even a thimbleful of brandy there," he gestured vaguely to a table container several decanters, "then...I might very well be too drunk."

She snatched her hand from his and pulled the her shawl tightly about her shoulders and stared up at him, as if daring him to continue.

He stepped towards her, "As is, you are fortunate that I have come across you in such a state. For you see, a little drink loosens the tongue of the most stalwart of men. I am just the perfect amount of drunk. I am just the perfect amount of drunk, madame, to tell you just how beautiful I find you. Just how lovely. Just how irresistibly haughty and delightfully improper I find you..."

She looked at him incredulously, mouth momentarily agape and replied, "Does that work with your camp followers? Inebriated bluster...offering extravagant compliments in tandem with slight effrontery? Or is your speech designed to confound a gentle lady such as myself?"

"Gentle?" he snorted. Then he took another step towards her and sobered, "Perhaps you are gentle. You are gentle with your horse, to be certain...with your sister, I have observed it on occasion. But gentleness is not your foundation. You are Diana, the huntress, maiden goddess, and bringer of light. You are a tigress, a fearsome opponent, and not one to be tamed...not to sit forever in a drawing room providing endless cups of tea and tepid solicitude." He reached out and slowly traced a finger across her brow, cupping her cheek in his hand, "Like Blake's tiger, your eyes burn with fire,

and I believe you need a strong man to twist the sinews of thy heart.”

He closed his eyes and leaned forward as if to kiss her, and though she felt more alive than she had in days, in years, in... perhaps her life...she pulled back and placed a hand on his chest, “You...you hardly know me. And I...I am hardly so fearsome.”

He opened his eyes and gazed at her steadily. “And I am not so very drunk, I will have you know. I no more make a habit of sliding into my cups than I do of wooing fair tigresses in darkened rooms.”

He straightened and lightened his tone, “I spent the evening charming the men of Colonel Forster’s militia, and preventing civil disorder and sedition.”

“Preventing civil disorder, here in Meryton? Is the butcher threatening the baker or the candlestick maker?” she smiled at him, relieved and disappointed all at once by his retreat.

“Sometimes, the mission is not so direct, but the problem resides not with the butcher, but with a member of the militia itself. Tonight was spent nurturing some seeds of doubt I planted earlier about a snake in their midst.”

“And were you successful?”

“It is a slow process, but yes. Tonight I saw evidence that the circle of influence of this particular reptile is contracting significantly. My reputation grows stronger with each pint of the publican’s finest I purchase for them, each cigar I hand out, and every hand of cards I lose. I am, at this point, easily the most popular man in Meryton.”

“You do not strike me as a man who easily loses at cards.”

He laughed, “No indeed. Well, perhaps against Darcy, my cousin has the most inscrutable features, but in general no, I do not lose. I generally do not engage in gaming, and I do not play games which I cannot win.”

“Then why did you spend a long, and I assume, disagreeable evening at the gaming tables, smoking and drinking?” she asked betraying some pique at his absence.

“Most of the men in the militia are good men, boys really, who just want a bit of leadership and direction, but there is a more dishonorable one in their midst. I am sad to say that he is former childhood friend, who turned out rather bad. I feel it my duty to protect the local society and even his fellow soldiers from his transgressions.”

“And does this villain have a name?” she asked with the interest of one detecting a juicy morsel of gossip.

He looked at her a long while before answering, and then spoke slowly, as if weighing each word, “You in particular, I suppose, should also be aware of the blackguard’s identity as heiresses are his favorite object. He is Lieutenant George Wickham. His father served Darcy’s father as Pemberley’s steward. We grew up as boys, causing all of the mischief that boys are wont to do - the worst of it involved frogs and mud or stolen pastries from the kitchen. As we grew older, instead of taking advantage of the gentleman’s education provided him by old Mr. Darcy, who was also his godfather, George fell in with the fast lot at Cambridge. He preferred taking his chances at the gaming tables to studying and learned more about how to ingratiate himself with others than any knowledge that could found in a book.”

“Could the same not be said of many young men at university?” she asked with true curiosity. “Hurst loves nothing more than to wax rhapsodic on his days at the very same university, where he spent as much time *drinking with the lads*,” she did a fair imitation of Hurst’s deep and gravelly voice, “as he did in lectures. I had always thought that was a very grand part of the experience for men.”

The Colonel smiled, “Well, you are entirely correct. Most fellows to enjoy their freedom rather too much initially, and many evenings could be described as full and riotous. But even Hurst, who was incidentally in my year at school, attended his studies as much as his social engagements. Which is to say not as much as he should, but just enough to receive decent marks.

“The same cannot be said of George Wickham. He cheated his way through exams, cheated his way through card games, and aspired to make his way in the world by marrying money.”

Caroline interrupted once more, “I do not mean to question your good word or defend the honor of a man I do not know, but cannot the same be said of most marriages in the Ton? Do we not, as a rule, seek to better our lot through marriage? Be it seeking fortune, title, or buying respectability...are not most marriages agreements negotiated upon something more practical and less romantic?” she finished with something like perturbation in her voice.

Once again, Richard Fitzwilliam regarded her in silence before answering, “You do describe the majority of marriages made within our society, I grant you. But I for one would prefer to make a match

for reasons other than pure pecuniary advantage.”

“Ah, but as a second son do you truly have such freedom?”

The Colonel appeared chagrined, “Are you free, Miss Bingley, to marry where you wish?”

“We were not discussing me. We were discussing the basis of marriage in general. But since you ask, no. I am not *free* to marry where I wish. Women on the whole are decidedly NOT free to do *anything* we wish. Just like at a dance, we sit and wait, and have not enjoyment or liberty of selecting our partners. To refuse one man, no matter who unappealing, is to hazard sitting out the entirety of the night. To refuse a seemingly advantageous offer of marriage is to risk being placed on the shelf, for who amongst the men of Whites or Boodles has the confidence to risk such a rejection?” she gave a short and bitter laugh. “So if, in one’s first season, one is to reject an offer from a *gentleman* who would use his bride’s monies to prop up his sagging estate and fund his profligate habits, like the housing of his mistress...that lady risks being shunned by the lot of those dandies as an upstart, a scheming arriviste with her eye on rank alone. The tongues wag and the word spreads quickly, and that lady’s prospects diminish greatly. The other ladies understand her, for once the marriage document is signed, what is hers is his, but they too whisper and laugh, as the competition just grew lighter by one.”

Her eyes blazed with righteous indignation,

The rain beat a steady rhythm on the panes and he moved close to her again. “Fearsome. And beautiful. I am sorry that society can be so cruel...”

Caroline ducked past him quickly and busied herself by lighting another candle. She took both candles and walked over to the seat she had occupied earlier. “I saved you a treat,” Caroline blushed as much for the circumstances in which she had willingly placed herself as for inanity of her words, which sounded silly even to her own ears following so closely on a conversation of such a personal nature. She picked up the plate and offered it to Colonel Fitzwilliam ruefully. “It looked much more appealing earlier.”

The Colonel took the plate and sat in one of the chairs, “Miss Bingley,” his voice earnest and quiet, “I do not desire to make you uncomfortable, but feel a need to finish our conversation. I will have you know that George Wickham’s ambitions differ from the average man’s. May I speak quite candidly?”

She nodded her assent.

“His list of accomplishments include siring at least one child with a Pemberley maid, and another child with an innkeeper’s daughter in Lambton. He has attempted an elopement with one heiress, an innocent young woman who perhaps let the notion of romance rule over her good judgement.”

“What happened to these poor women?” Caroline asked quietly.

“Darcy is too good to turn anyone out, especially when if she is a victim of a cad’s deceit. Both the maid and the innkeeper’s daughter live on the Pemberley estate with their children. The women earn a living making lovely shawls and intricate woven goods. They are fortunate to have such a kind sponsor - they are able to raise their children and live a respectable enough life. The young gentlewoman, too quite luckily, escaped a dismal fate and has learned a valuable lesson with little more to show for it than her own embarrassment, and what she perhaps perceives as a broken heart.

“And these are but the indiscretions which have become known to Darcy and to me. That there have been others is without a doubt. Additionally, Wickham has left a trail of debt wherever he goes, establishing credit with his smooth talk and well-placed use of the Darcy name. He is in all ways despicable.”

They sat in silence for moment, which the Colonel broke with a sweet smile, “It was most kind of you to think of me,” he lifted the plate of dessert, “charming the militiamen comes at the cost of breathing in cigar-fouled air, drinking more than does me good, and worst of all, missing out on the generous table you set. I am famished.”

Caroline shifted forward in the chair opposite him as he picked up the spoon, “I am afraid it has suffered as it sat, but Mr. Darcy said that it is-”

“Why it is none other than my dear old Reynold’s apple pudding with Calvados cream!” he interjected with no small amount of enthusiasm. “However did you manage to create this? I have tried on numerous occasions to wrest the receipt from Mrs. Reynolds for my parent’s cook.” He took another healthy bite, “It is a favorite from my childhood and quite a treat indeed!” He returned to the dessert with great spirit and devoured half before pausing.

He looked up to see her gazing at him with something like astonishment. He colored, “I am afraid my manners have deserted

me. When in camp, food is something best not savored, but rather eaten with expediency and if possible without tasting it. Please excuse me.” He took another bite and made a great effort at displaying a slow enjoyment of the dish.

Before she could stop it, a low laugh issued from her lips, “It is clear that Mr. Darcy was correct in naming it a favorite. It is good to see someone so well pleased.”

He cocked his head at her, “Do you imply that others have not been so well-pleased?”

“It would not be proper for me to say.”

“Miss Bingley, nothing about this,” he waved his spoon in the air, “is exactly proper. Why bring propriety into this chat now?” He went back to eating his dessert.

“My brother, though the most amiable man does find fault with me from time to time,” she sighed, “and your cousin has, of course, the most refined manners and is the most respectable gentleman. Mr. Darcy seems to me the very height of refined style, cultivation, education...and try as I might, I find it difficult to satisfy him...as an honored guest, of course,” she paused, “You are refreshingly easy to please.”

The Colonel put down his empty plate and snorted, “My cousin is a paragon of responsibility, and it is difficult to measure oneself against anyone who excels in almost every endeavor he undertakes. He is the best of men, takes prodigious care of everything and everyone within his purview. But he is not a saint, Miss Bingley, nor is he a prize. He is a man, and like any other man, has his faults and his desires. No man wants to be indulged.”

Miss Bingley was silent.

“Your brother is indeed an amiable man, but is it not the very essence, the very mandate of a brother to trouble his sister? I was under the impression that it was my charge to vex my own sisters as often as possible. So while you are welcome to find Darcy a bit stuffy, a touch arrogant, I believe you must forgive your brother his offenses. A brother pokes and prods at his sisters, but it is always well-meant.

“And now, if you will indulge me,” he stood and offering his hand virtually pulled Caroline to her feet, “nothing would please me more than a dance.”

“A dance! Here and now?”

“If not now, then when? There is no better time than the present

for one never knows how the future may unfold. Come,” he moved to pull her closer.

She resisted and kept him at arm’s length, “There is no music, and it would be inexcusably wanton of me to dance with a man, alone and in the dark.”

“One man’s wanton is another man’s spirited,” he countered with a smile.

“I believe Colonel, that any man with his wits about him would consider me dancing here with you, now, to be most inadvisable.”

“I believe Miss Bingley, that any man with his wits about him would consider dancing here with you, now, to be something close to heaven.” He twirled her once, like a ballerina, then bowed over her hand and released her. He took one of the candles and walked to the door then turned back to face her once more.

“And Miss Caroline Bingley, I believe I do know you, regardless of the short duration of our acquaintance. Good-night.”

Caroline stood in place for some time, staring vacantly at the door. Her disordered and tumultuous thoughts played out across her expressive face, leading her through frowns and soft smiles, and turning to surprise when the striking clock chimed midnight.

She picked up the remaining candle and made her way to her room, hoping to escape the notice of Blanchet. With all the final preparations for Lydia Bennet’s Ball tomorrow, she was loathe to make demands on her personal servant. Caroline closed the door to her chamber as softly as possible, and tiptoed to her bed. Before she covered half the distance, her dressing room door opened and a disapproving Blanchet entered.

“Good evening, Miss Caroline,” she said with her most disapproving of tone, using her Gallic accent to better the impression.

“Blanchet, I am so sorry to keep you from your bed the night before the ball-”

Blanchet cut off her mistresses’ apologies, a singular interruption, “I am unconcerned about the loss of my sleep, but I am most concerned, particulièrement, in what matters you can possibly need to attend to *à minuit*.” She gave Miss Bingley a stern look of disapproval, “It is even after midnight and my maiden lady is found creeping up the stairs and into her room. It is that soldier, is it not? Perhaps when you have frappé ta tête...how do you say... bumped your head, you have scattered your brains.”

During her speech, Blanchet had speedily managed to remove Caroline's dress and stays, and now directed her to sit in her chemise while she let down her hair. She brushed it none to gently as Caroline sat. "You are right to say so, I should take better care for my reputation. I still have at least some of my wits about me. I think." She furrowed her brow at her reflection for a moment as her maid quietly plaited her hair, then smiled, "I do not what comes over me from time to time...why I must challenge my brother or defy convention, but it is when I feel most free, most myself." She paused as Blanchet's hands stilled, and the two women contemplated each other in the mirror.

"It is not really for me to say, Miss Caroline. But I do not want to see you suffer," Blanchet's pronunciation improving as her temper cooled, "You need a proper home and a proper husband. Not one who will leave you to go fight against that little tyrant the *Little Corporal*." Blanchet smiled, "You need a proper husband, and then you will be as free as you want to speak with a man after midnight, ride your horse comme une folle, and do exactly as you please."

She put down the brush and turned down the bed covers, "Now you are to sleep. Tomorrow my lady shall be the most beautiful creature at the ball. No tired eyes for you!"

Caroline squeezed her hand as she slipped into bed, "Thank you, Laurine, for your concern. I will think about your words. I promise you." She grinned widely, "but he is the most charming man!"

Blanchet grinned back, "And very handsome, n'est-ce pas?"

* * *

...oooOooo...

Sergeant Tate opened the door as Colonel Fitzwilliam reached for the knob on the other side.

"You will have to teach me how you manage that trick someday, Tate."

The Sergeant kept a straight face, "Sometimes it is the smarter thing to keep one's tricks to oneself."

"Are we speaking of your preternatural ability to sense someone's presence on the other side of a closed door?"

"Perhaps. But maybe not. I understand why you spend your hours with the men in town. That is a mission with clear objectives."

"And?" Colonel Fitzwilliam knew his man would get to the point when he was ready, but as the hour was late, hoped it would be sooner rather than later.

"Well I can't rightly say I understand why you would think it good and sensible to sit with a pretty young maiden, alone in the dark after the rest of the house has gone to bed." He pursed his lips at his commanding officer. "Unless you are wanting to be leg-shackled, no good can come of ruining either one of yer reputations."

Colonel Fitzwilliam held his own tongue, knowing that his batman would be better left to speak his piece without interruption.

Tate tapped the Colonel's shoulder and he helped shrug off his coat as Tate guided him out of the snug fitting jacket, talking all the while, "She is not as bad as all that, for an upstart city-sort of miss with more money than breeding. She saw fit to check up on my situation, and asked me personally if I was satisfied with my accommodations. From talk below-stairs, Miss Bingley is demanding, but nothing more than is reasonable. Seems more like she don't exactly know what to do about the running of such a big house as this, but Mrs. Nicholls has nothing bad to say about the woman, and Miss Bingley is apparently quick to learn, never makes the same mistake twice. Although she won't admit to not knowing a thing. She is a bit of a sly one, a clever lady.

"Her own abigail speaks of her like she is the best mistress in the land. Laurine Blanchet. Now there is woman I can respect. She is real and true Frenchie - not some poor Sally from the country turned into a Sylvie to suit some fancy lady's need for a maid from

Paris. And this Blanchet, she has nothing but praise for Miss Caroline, as she calls her. She does like her silk dresses, but then what woman would not prefer something soft like that.

“No,” Tate continued relentlessly, as the Colonel now divested of his day garments looked longingly towards his bed, “No, Miss Bingley may like to put on airs, but I believe she has a good heart. And I believe she deserves better than to have her fragile reputation, for what single woman’s reputation is not fragile...” he paused and puffed out his chest, “She deserves better than to have a man of the world skulk about in the dark with her, where any passing servant could see them together and start to talking.”

Richard Fitzwilliam’s eyebrows shot up, “You were spying on me!”

“No. I was observing the house, as you instructed. And what I observed wasn’t much to your credit, as a gentleman, but my presence outside the drawing room did ensure that none of that was observed by any of the staff.”

“*None of that?* There was no ‘none of that’ to be had in the drawing room, and if you stood watching you would know better yourself,” replied the Colonel with some indignation.

“The way I saw it was that there was a bit of that. ’Twas you with a few drinks in you romancing an innocent young pretty all by yourself with naught but a candle for a chaperone.”

The Colonel hung his head, “I appeared for all purposes like a common rake, no better than that dog, Wickham.”

“I would not have scrupled to interrupt had I thought you as bad as all that. I know you to be the best of officers, which makes you the best of the best of men. I am just telling you the way any of the locals would see it. You and the lady should consider holding your conversations in the light of day.”

Sergeant Tate tossed a night shirt to the Colonel and bid him a good-night, “I will be sure to wake you with the first light of day,” he said with a wink.

“You are a good man, Tate. I will be more circumspect in my behavior. She is just so beguiling,” he said with a smile, “I thank you for your diligent care and for your delicacy in this matter.”

Tate snorted, “Delicate like a cannon ball.” He exited the room with the Colonel’s scarlet coat slung over his arm, off to brush it to its finest.

Part III

Lydia Bennet's Ball

Ready for the Ball

The day of the ball arrived cold but clear. After a succession of rainy days, the inhabitants of Netherfield were relieved that the roads were clear and that the sun and moon both shone brightly down day and night, respectively, allowing their guests to attend the highly anticipated celebration.

As expected, Charles Bingley had of course requested the hand of Jane Bennet to open the ball. Somewhat unexpectedly, Mr Darcy had asked Caroline Bingley for the first set, although upon reflection, propriety dictated that he would ask his hostess to open the ball, even if her figure was not as rounded nor her eyes so fine as Eliza Bennet's.

For a flash, Caroline considered refusing his offer, as the intervening days had done little to cool her mortification and ire at having been abused so roundly by both Darcy and her brother, but a moment of pique would not serve her purpose - Pemberley! Additionally, she would have then had to sit out for the entirety of the ball, as a lady was not allowed to refuse a gentleman's offer and then dance with another. Caroline found this social stricture tiresome in the best of circumstances, as she had suffered through two seasons of paunchy partners, sweaty palms, and groping hands on the off chance that Darcy or some other sought after gentlemen should ask her for a set. The injustice!

So it was that she would dance the first with Darcy, the second with her brother, the third with Hurst and the fourth with that cocksure first son of Sir William Lucas, Percival Lucas.

The Lucas whelp had cornered her when she and Louisa visited what passed for a milliner in Meryton and had boldly asked her for the first set. His application was unexpected in that the invitations had only just been delivered that morning, and she had not thought that the heir of Lucas Lodge would be found looking at ladies hats. He had, however, on past occasion been rather bold in his appreciation of her charms, and had previously importuned her to dance with him which she had reluctantly done. He was of the handsy variety. Though as seemingly genial in manners as his

fulsome father, Percy Lucas was in her experience less jovial and more leering.

She found satisfaction in rejecting him for the first three sets, but then had to give him the fourth. Louisa found her predicament quite amusing, and teased Caroline out of her resultant vexation by pointing out that her fate could be worse - she could have had to accept young, fondling Lucas for the supper set and be forced to talk with him throughout the meal in addition to dancing with him. In her wisdom, she also reminded Caroline that as the hostess, she could dictate which dance was played when throughout the course of the evening. Caroline determined that the fourth would be a lively Scottish reel, requiring little conversation with her partner, and even less physical contact.

After completing a successful trip to the milliner's, pledged dance to Percival Lucas notwithstanding, Louisa and Caroline met with Mrs. Nicholls one last time to review all of their well-planned details. They walked through the entrance hall and the ballroom, approving of all they saw and taking care not disturb the chalk artist at work on the ballroom floor, and expressed all their satisfaction repeatedly to Mrs. Nicholls, who was deeply gratified to receive such accolades.

Satisfied that the preparations were well in hand, the sisters retired to the drawing room for a light meal before making their personal preparations for the dance.

The Colonel slipped through the doors unnoticed by the sisters as Caroline recounted the details of her conversation with Percival Lucas to her sister. Although Louisa was in the milliner's, she was unable to see Mr. Lucas' expression or hear much of his words, as she hid behind a tall display to avoid being asked to dance herself. Though married women were not generally partnered as often as the single ladies, her newness and high London style had also made Louisa Hurst quite a popular partner.

Percy Lucas had the poor judgement to ask about each individual slot on her dance card rather than simply asking for her first available. Caroline enthusiastically described Lucas' growing irritation at being denied her hand three times and pantomimed the young man's facial expressions and body language with a great amount of skill.

Each question was recounted with growing levels of exaggeration and buffoonery, as Caroline switched from her point

of view to that of Mr. Lucas - she all snotty discouragement countering his dogged insistence. The sisters were in tears over her comic display, which Caroline concluded with a grand bow.

As she swept her arm into the air behind her with a flourish worthy of Sarah Siddons herself, Colonel Fitzwilliam stepped in and grasped her outstretched hand, pulling her up and into his arms and quickly waltzed her about the room.

"I am to understand then, Miss Bingley, that I will have to wait until the fifth to claim your hand for a set?" he inquired with his own exaggerated frown as he twirled her around the drawing room in perfect 3/4 time.

Thrown completely off guard and being skillfully guided in dizzying swirls, Caroline struggled to form a cohesive thought. She took a deep breath, and was further overcome by the warm and subtle scent of citrus and woods. What was it about this man? Then again, what was not it about this man?

He slowed and brought her back to where Louisa sat watching with a poorly concealed smile, and spun her about on her toes one last time before releasing her hand and offering her a short bow.

She felt unbalanced and suddenly very cold after feeling the warmth of his hand on the small of her back. He held her gaze, and she noticed flecks of copper in the flinty blue of his eyes. His eyes were not warm, but searching and discerning. She looked away, feeling as though he could see through her, was privy to her innermost thoughts, thoughts and feelings she fervently protected and kept private.

"Unless of course you have already promised that set to another?"

Caroline recovered looked down as she gave him a short curtsy, "No. My card is open for the fifth. It is the supper set," she needlessly elaborated, immediately regretting her artlessness. Why did he confound her so? She was so much more proficient in these parlor games than she appeared. It was mortifying to be so tongue-tied.

"Then I shall be guaranteed interesting conversation following a highly anticipated dance. It is a perfect answer however long in coming," he grinned.

He then turned his attention to Louisa, "And what of you, Mrs. Hurst? Might you consider sparing a dance for a creaky old soldier?"

"I am available for the fourth, Colonel, but I see no creaky old soldiers in need of partners. Are you asking for yourself?" she paused and stood, "For if so, I would have you draw a much prettier picture. I only see a ruggedly handsome man, who is rather light on his feet for possessing such an imposing shape," she finished with a raised eyebrow.

There followed a moment of silence in which Caroline gaped at her sister, then the air cracked with a great guffaw from Colonel Fitzwilliam. "Why Mrs. Louisa Hurst! I do like a woman who speaks plainly. I remember finding you a pretty, little, slip of a thing when Bernie made you his wife, but upon further acquaintance I find you offer so much more than that - you are nothing but pure delight. And what of you, Miss Caroline Bingley?" his glowing smile beamed at her, "Will you be dancing with a dashing cavalry-man or a battle-weary ruffian?"

"Ruffians were specifically omitted from the guest list. Like my sister, I do attempt to fill my dance card with only the most dashing of gentlemen."

"Then if your dance card needs filling, I will let you know that I would happily claim the last set from you too."

Louisa and Caroline exchanged a look of surprise, and she stated, "Colonel the set is yours, but if you do not take care, tongues will wag."

He looked at her blankly, as if confused.

"They will assume that you are courting me, sir," she huffed.

He smiled, "Then I will be happy to offer any and all actions in support of their assumptions, Miss Bingley," he gave her a most winsome smile, "And now if you will excuse me ladies, I must submit to the ministrations of my batman. Sergeant Tate will brush and polish me to within an inch of my life, and will scold me in words most ungentle if I do not appear before him immediately."

The Colonel walked away with smart steps, and as soon as the door had closed, Louisa nearly yelped. "My dear sister! Whatever have you done to Colonel Fitzwilliam? He is a man most smitten."

"I believe he admires my horsemanship," answered Caroline lamely.

"Well I believe he admires a great deal more than how you sit in a saddle, my dear. A great deal more," she gazed at her sister appraisingly, "Why you sly thing...all this time prowling about Mr. Darcy as you secretly engage in a flirtation with the good Colonel..."

and discussing none of it with me, your own sister,” she shook her head. “No matter, dearest, for I support you fully in your choice. You are much better suited.”

Caroline was at a loss, but the moment passed, “No! You suppose too much, Louisa! I have conducted no flirtation...” her voice trailed off and she winced, thinking of her brazen meeting with the Colonel just the night before in the drawing room, “Well that was never my intent anyway. But we have no understanding... there has been no discussion...”

“If I am not mistaken, and I am decidedly not, you have just received a declaration from the man that he would like to enter into a courtship with you, Caro. Whether you choose to agree to such an arrangement or not is your decision,” Louisa paused, “but you would be a fool not to take him.”

Caroline made to interrupt and her sister held up a hand to silence her, “No, hear me out. Fitzwilliam Darcy has never so much as offered you a ‘Bless you’ when you sneeze much less a courtship. He does not suit you. You would live an empty life, with pretty gowns providing your only warmth on cold nights. And nights at Pemberley in the dead of winter would be decidedly cold, stuck in an enormous house with no where to go, a husband that does not love you hiding away in his study or library...your only occupation meeting with a housekeeper that does not like you to plan the next meal and discuss which guest room needs airing and how many candles should be ordered. Is that what you want for your time, Caroline?

“Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam may not possess a fine estate, and he may not appear as refined at first glance, but he is a fine man, Caro, equally gentlemanlike and additionally blessed with a warm temperament,” she sighed deeply. “If that is not enough, he looks at you as if you are the most enticing, exquisite piece of pastry and he is a starving man.”

“Louisa!”

“Well he does. And he is dashing, sister...ruggedly handsome... substantial. That is it. He is in every way substantial - in humor, in manners, intelligence, definitely in form, in connections, and in grace. Yes, I like him for you very well.”

“He is in every substantial yes, and I admire him a great deal.” Caroline stopped as her sister emitted a self-congratulatory sound, then shook her head gently and continued, “He lacks means, Louisa.

Even Bernard has his house in Grosvenor Square. Where would you have me live? Should I be a camp follower, forever moving in and out of military installation and living in a tent? Or would I live out my days as a troublesome inconvenience, imposing on you and Charles, waiting for my husband the Colonel to return from whatever skirmish to which he has been assigned? How would that sort of life lead to happiness? I cannot see it.”

“Then you are a bit of a fool, Caroline Bingley. Happiness is not proportionally related to the size of a man’s estate, my dear, but to the love he holds for you in his heart. But it seems that you will hold to your own stubborn views rather than listen to the experience of one who has had to make such choices.” Louisa stood, ending the conversation abruptly, “I must go and prepare for our guests.”

Caroline crossed her arms tightly and seethed, “I am not a fool, nor am I stubborn.”

Louisa strode quickly to the door and turned back for one last word, “If there is room in that head of yours for a second opinion, I do hope you will consider hearing at least some of mine. Do not throw yourself at a wealthy man who does not want you and will make you miserable. Open your heart to one who would instead provide you with a wealth of joy and true security - the kind that comes with being truly cherished by one’s husband .” She frowned at her sister for good measure and exited with a puff of exasperation.

Her own emotions roiling, Caroline cried, “Why does rustivating in this desolate little wild make my questionably dear family think that they know what I need! Since when have you been the happiest woman alive, *Lou-i-sa*, hmm? How long have you been so all-knowing. And since when has *Charles* been known for his sagacity? The man can barely write a proper sentence - should he be the one to choose the direction of my life?” She stuck her tongue out at the vacant doorway.

She flopped back against a sofa and grabbed a pillow and hugged it tightly, burying her face in the top edge. “Oooh they make me so angry,” she breathed into the fabric. She leaned her head back against the edge of the sofa, closed her eyes, and took a fortifying and deep breath, as Miss Ryall had suggested she do whenever she found herself besieged by excessive temper. “They treat me as if I were still a child on the one hand, yet want to marry

me off to every eligible gentleman who comes along. And I...I..." she trailed off, "I do not know what I want any longer."

She sat up straight and tossed the pillow aside. "Wait a moment...I, Caroline Bingley do not know what I want." A slight smile tugged at the corners of her lips. *Is it possible that I do not want to be Mrs. Fitzwilliam Darcy?!? Of course to be the mistress of Pemberley would be delightful...status, connections, wealth, security, beautiful gowns...who would not find that desirable. But what of being tied to Mr. Darcy?*

She shut her eyes tight and attempted to imagine being intimate with Fitzwilliam Darcy. His serious eyes and grimacing mouth bending to kiss her...suddenly laughter filled the room, and Caroline was surprised that it had issued from her own person. "Oh that will never do. The mistress of Pemberley by necessity must eventually kiss the master of Pemberley." She closed her eyes again and leaned against the sofa back, this time instead of starting with Darcy, she focused on imagining her first kiss.

In her minds eye, she was impeccably turned out as she would be tonight for the ball - all silky fabric and lustrous pearls. Her hair was...well her straight-ish hair was never perfect for the fashionable piles of endless curls to prevalent these days, but was at least healthy and swept back into a sleek and elegant style. She imagined that her cheeks would be flushed, as would any proper maidens about to receive her first kiss.

Caroline tilted her head back against the sofa and closed her eyes, just as she would in her fantasy...

Her betrothed - for she would never accept a kiss without a promise of marriage - bent his head closer and she could feel the warmth of his body as he wrapped his strong arms about hers, enveloping her in a gentle embrace...his deep blue staring into hers, sunlight streaming through a lock of his unruly, sandy hair as it tickled her cheek...

She jumped up from the sofa with a yelp. "No," she whispered through a hand that she held up to her lips as if to block the imaginary kiss from happening, "Mr. Darcy's hair is dark brown! No, no, no! This cannot be."

Quick steps led her from the room and up the stairs, as if she were putting distance between herself and her imaginary lover. She burst into her chambers, "Blanchet!" she called out with little civility, "Blanchet, I need to get ready. Please ready my bath." She sat at her toilet and stared at her reflection in the mirror, furrowing

her brow, and leaning close, turning her head from side to side in examination. "What is wrong with me," she muttered as Blanchet opened the door.

"Your bath is ready, Madam," Blanchet formally announced, betraying a bit of annoyance at the harsh summons from her mistress.

"Forgive me, Blanchet, you are faultless and I was rude. I simply lost track of time and feel so much pressure for tonight to be perfect..."

Blanchet smiled warmly, "Yes, Miss Caroline, your plans have been *simplement exquis*, how do you say, exquisite. A bit of time in the hot water will sooth your body and mind. And then we will make you radiant and *merveilleuse*! You will be the most beautiful and elegant of all the ladies. You must not fret."

Caroline let herself be led to the steaming bath, and gratefully slipped down into the soothing water. She felt the tension beginning to leave her body. She inhaled deeply and smelled lavender and something else, she sat up quickly, "I had wanted the rose oil for this evening, Blanchet."

"Shh," she soothed as she gently pushed Caroline back into the water, "this is a mixture of orange and eucalyptus. You will find it balancing. You do not want to smell like every Miss who attends the ball, no? All young ladies think that they should smell like roses," she shook her head. "No, my mistress will be the one to stand out tonight. No rose scent for you. You are not a flower to be found in a common English garden. Let the others smell of lavender and rose."

"My good looks and growing reputation as a hostess are in your good and talented hands."

The two women smiled at each other with genuine affection, "Then you trust me when I say that tonight will be discussed over tea for days. It will be a huge success. Now you rest and relax. Save your energy for dancing, smiling, and making witty conversation with handsome men."

...oooOooo...

* * *

Blanchet huffed for her to sit still as she wove a single, white feather into Caroline's hair. The feather arched around the slightly messy, gathered, twisting strands of hair that Blanchet had so carefully arranged into an attractive and very feminine style. There had been no tedious application of hot irons, no struggle to force her stick-straight hair into fashionable Greek ringlets. No, Blanchet had insisted on no curls, and the soft bun at the back of her head was surprisingly becoming.

"You do not suppose that our guests might consider my hair too casual, perhaps a bit too unfinished..."

Blanchet cut her off with no little amount of impatience, "No, my lady, again no. This is the perfect style for your costume, your ballgown. Your hair must look more natural...a bit more delicate... you cannot force your hair into those silly ringlets...you do not want to look like some porcelain doll. Not in this dress, not the way I have prepared your gown. You must be more delicate than you look most of the time. You must present yourself as more... spontan  ."

"Spontaneous?"

"Ah oui, spontaneous. You cannot be so studied. Tonight you are a more natural creature, or perhaps more like a wood-nymph. I do not know, but your hair is perfect. No touching," she tapped Caroline's fingers, "leave it be! Now close your eyes..."

The maid gently grasped Caroline's shoulders and stood her up, ushering her to the pier glass.

"Open, please."

Caroline opened her eyes and turned this way and that, admiring the loft and sway in the overskirt of her ballgown. She could not look away.

The reflection in the mirror could not possibly be her own. The woman in the mirror was elegant but soft looking...she looked

warm and inviting, happy almost. She had a glow about her.

Who was this woman?

She pressed her fingers to her lips, then started laughing, low and deep. "Oh Blanchet, this is beautiful. This is just amazing!" She let out a little squeal of delight and turned and hugged her maid.

Blanchet's eyes widened and she tensed under such an unexpected display of emotion from her mistress. She gradually raised an arm, and patted Caroline slightly then freed herself from the embrace, "Yes Miss Caroline, you are very beautiful, no? But let us not disturb any of your borrowed feathers," and laughed a bit at her own joke.

Caroline marveled at the fineness of her dress. The silk bodice was artfully covered with vertically arranged feathers, from her natural waist to the neckline, where the tips of the feathers slightly tickled her skin. They also enhanced her modest bust, which Caroline was pleased to see had a slightly more impressive profile. The bodice was also alarmingly form fitting - more like something from her mother's dancing days than the current Empire waisted gowns.

But the best part by far was the overskirt. Blanchet had taken the fine, netted skirting and stitched the lightest, airiest feathers along the hemlines of each layer of the overskirt. The result was that the skirt appeared to almost float in the air around her, and it flowed and flounced around her every move, making the smallest step appear graceful and light. She felt like a fairy. She felt invincible.

Belle of the Ball

Opening the ball with Fitzwilliam Darcy; that was the one bright spot of the evening for Caroline Bingley.

Additionally, as she was the hostess, and since the ball was being held in no one's honor in particular, she was allowed to call the first dance. She had briefly toyed with naming a waltz, but dismissed the idea as too wicked, even for her.

Though the dance was popping up at private balls in Town like mad, these provincials would be scandalized by the close contact the dance required. Moreover, she felt it was unlikely that anyone in the wilds of Hertfordshire even knew the steps.

So she decided upon the Duchess of Devonshire's Reel. Caroline despised a reel - so lively and so unsophisticated - but her choice would allow her to walk the entire length of the ballroom floor with Fitzwilliam Darcy beside her. And that was well worth dancing a reel. And that particular reel was not so bad; it did have a Duchess's name attached to it after all, even if that Duchess was long since dead. It was somewhat elegant she mused, even if it was an old country dance.

She would float down the center of the line on Darcy's arm repeatedly. He would have to touch her, hold her arm firmly against his, and he would have to make some conversation with her as they awaited their turn to twirl and then promenade. Together she and Mr. Darcy would provide such a cultivated and regal contrast to all of the dancers around them. She would be the envy of all of the ladies present. Even that coarse Eliza Bennet would look upon her with a green eye; Eliza might be too self-absorbed to have noted Mr. Darcy's inexplicable preference for her, but no one could deny his worthiness as a dance partner...his mastery of the exercise...his utterly handsome face...his athletic form...what woman could resist coveting *that*?

Her unusual gown would undoubtedly create a stir of want in those same females. She smiled widely with the pleasant distraction her thoughts brought. She would be spoken of as *The Belle of the Ball*, and Mr. Darcy would know that she was just as sophisticated

as any of those sharp-clawed London Ladies of impeccable breeding, and with better natural taste to boot. "Convict in the former colonies indeed!" she snorted to herself under her breath, "More like Colonel in the Regulars."

She gasped out loud and clapped a hand over her mouth as if trying to hold back the very thought. "Now where did that come from?" she murmured.

Smiles Everyone!

Darcy was the first to descend the stairs. He walked down the hall and was pleased to see that Mrs. Nicholls had all things well in hand - maids and footmen were lighting candles and filling the punch bowl. Furniture and rugs had been removed, with the exception of several smart groupings of chairs and little tables designed to provide a comfortable place for those who would not participate in dancing but would still like to be part of the festivities.

He was surprised to find that the decorations were more understated and less excessive and much to his taste. A man was completing a chalk drawing on the well-polished floor. Much as Darcy appreciated the concern for the safe footing of those dancing, he found the practice to be ostentatious, as one could simply cover the floor with a dusting of chalk instead of paying an artist to cover the floor as if it were the Sistine Chapel. Still, he admired the design, and was surprised to see a woodland scene emerging, with nary a cherub or a Greek god in the motif. It had more the effect of finding oneself in a forest glen than in a pantheon of exalted elites.

Perhaps he would have to reconsider his opinions on both floor chalk art and on Miss Bingley's taste. Though the cost of hiring an artist to cover Netherfield's floor certainly reaffirmed his belief in that lady's extravagance, it was at least for this evening it was charmingly done.

"Gadzooks!" Darcy jumped and cried out when his reveries were interrupted by a hearty slap on his shoulder. Richard's laugh and Darcy's uncharacteristic oath drew the attention of the chalk artist and the footman lighting the candles in the chandelier.

"So jumpy, cousin! Merciful heaven, are you expecting to be set upon by highwaymen at the ball tonight?"

"Oh you witty devil. If you must know, I was considering that I may need to revise some of my former opinions about Miss Bingley. This, I must admit," he swept an arm out indicating the room in front of them, "is entirely to my liking." He looked almost confounded.

The Colonel laughed again but more of a low chuckle, mindful of the others present. "Come now Darcy, you make her out to be a villainess. She is really not so bad as all that. In fact, if you look a little deeper, I believe you will find a keen mind beneath that polished appearance."

"I have never doubted her intelligence, Richard, just her heart. Speaking of hearts, how is the wooing proceeding?"

Richard snorted, "Wooing. You make it sound as though each evening I sit beneath her window, strumming a lute and singing love songs to her. We have enjoyed several conversations, and I have found that she is a top-notch horsewoman. Tonight you will see me lead her onto the dance floor not once, but twice, for the supper set and for the closing set."

Darcy looked alarmed, "Why that is as good as declaring yourself, Richard! Have a care man."

"I understand that you have asked for the first dance, so why may I not ask for the other dances of significance?"

"I asked for her first dance because she is my hostess and it is only proper that I honor her as such. I assure you it is an honor that will not be repeated throughout the course of the evening."

Richard looked at his cousin with more than a hint of disapproval. "Darce, there is such a thing as overparticular. I very clearly understand that Caroline Bingley does not satisfy your rigorous qualifications for the future Mrs. Darcy, but please understand that I find her intriguing, and as I have made my desire to further our acquaintance, perhaps you could leave off the disparagement, at least for tonight."

Darcy opened his mouth as if to defend himself, and then closed it again and after a beat looked at his cousin somewhat ruefully, "I apologize, Richard. I meant no offense and you are right to say so. I have been too outspoken in my criticisms."

His cousin merely raised an eyebrow at that.

"And perhaps my criticisms are rather...well, perhaps my expectations are rather high."

This earned him a slight smile, "And you will spend the night dancing? With the otherwise partner-less, not just the finest ladies present?"

Darcy sighed, "After my dance with Miss Bingley, I will partner with Miss Charlotte Lucas, with Miss Mary Bennet, with Miss Patrice Long, and with Miss Mary King."

"That's the very thing, Darce!" the colonel chuckled his cousin on the arm, "I wasn't sure you took my advice to heart, and am heartily glad to hear you have put yourself out and arranged for these dances even before the first guests arrives. Well done!"

Darcy rolled his eyes.

"Come now, cousin. Your participation and your selection of partners should fix you as the most agreeable gentleman in the neighborhood, which is of the greatest importance in our quest to blacken the blackguard."

"First, Bingley will always be known as the most agreeable gentleman, wherever he goes - a happy circumstance which I do not care to alter. Second, I am almost embarrassed to admit such a thing to you, but I find myself perfectly happy to dance with these young ladies. Finally, with your approval, and I am most aggrieved to find myself applying for your permission to anything at all, I feel compelled to also ask Miss Elizabeth Bennet for a dance."

Darcy's enumeration was met with silence and a look of astonishment.

"I do not readily see which of my remarks rendered you speechless, but do tell as it is a situation I would see happily repeated. And often," Darcy smiled at his cousin's befuddlement.

The colonel laughed at himself, once more drawing attention from the chalk artist who scowled at the disturbance. "Perhaps we should take our conversation to the out of doors. This fellow might mistakenly draw a five-legged deer if we distract him once more."

The chalk artist crossed his arms and glared at the two men as they walked down the length of the room, hugging the wall and in an obvious effort to avoid touching the design on the floor. Darcy stepped out on the balcony, and watched with amusement as Richard give the artist a snappy salute and deep bow, closing the door softly behind them.

"You know, that man really is talented. You should get his name from Bingley, should you ever decide to host a ball yourself."

"Not bloody likely," Darcy muttered, "now what did you want to say that required us to step out into the chill air?"

"Manners, Darce, manners! Such words from you. Nothing too dire I assure you," he quickly shifted from amiable teasing to lower, serious tones, "but did want to share with you that Wickham is surely feeling the net closing around him. The shopkeepers and publicans have cut off his credit, and most of the officers refuse to

engage him in cards. He has no easy outlets to fund his preferred level of profligacy. ”

“Excellent work, Richard!” Darcy exclaimed with genuine admiration.

“Additionally, word has it that he is vetting the local misses in search of a large dowry, and bestows his charms solely on those few modest heiresses in the community. Which has left his former swooning female followers highly dissatisfied and a little less willing to lend a sympathetic ear to his tales of woe. His most recent target is none other than your fourth partner in the dance this evening, the timid and unfortunately freckled Miss Mary King.”

Darcy raised his eyebrows, “I did not know that Miss King was in possession of a fortune. I would not have asked her for a dance had I realized she held such status in these environs.”

Colonel Fitzwilliam waived off the comment dismissively. “She recently came into some ten thousand pounds. Miss Lydia Bennet has rather markedly spoken out against the injustice of Wickham’s desertion, claiming it very unfair that such a mousy thing as Miss King could hold his attentions, and attributing it to nothing short of her pecuniary advantage. Poor Miss King could greatly benefit from the compliment of standing up with you tonight...and...” the Colonel paused dramatically, “it will drive Wickham absolutely mad to see you dance with the object of his dubious affection. I would not miss such a scene for all the money in the King’s coffers.”

“Well, that is not saying much if you are speaking of the Prince Regent’s coffers. They are empty more often than not.”

“Compared to the meager pay of a Colonel in the 1st Hussars?”

“Which brings us back around to the beginning of this conversation. I know that this is rather personal, but please assure me that your interest in Miss Bingley is not based upon her substantial dowry. I would much rather fund you her purported twenty-thousand pounds than see you tied to a woman you could not love, Dickie.”

Richard bristled slightly then dropped his shoulders and smiled ruefully, “You know that the going price of a second son of an Earl is much higher than a measly twenty-thousand? Why, I could not be had for a farthing less than fifty.”

Darcy held up a hand, “You are a brother to me, Richard. No more quips. I would see you happily married...you deserve every felicity in this life after the sacrifices and pain you have endured for

love of country. You know I have an estate in the wilds of Scotland that sits empty in want of a lord of the manor-”

“You keep your Scottish estate for your own second son Darce. Your generosity is too much.” His eyes were suspiciously shiny, “I could never impose upon you in such a way...but your concern is duly noted, and in return I would like to put your mind to rest.

“Miss Caroline Bingley’s fortune is, in truth, not enough Darcy,” he held up a hand to forestall any comment from his cousin, “If a dowry was my aim, I would at this very moment be in London, escorting my mother to every ball and social event the season has to offer. And she, bless her well-connected and well-meaning heart, would have me affianced to the daughter of a high ranking Peer of the Realm with more money than sense or conversation by the end of the week. You know I speak the truth.”

Darcy gave that a low chuckle, “Yes, Lady Matlock is a crafty one. I have long thought that your keen sense of strategy came from sitting quietly with dear Aunt Eleanor during her many teas and dinner parties. Arranging a marriage would be the work of a moment for your mother.” Darcy grew solemn, “But as I said, I wish for you to find a deep and abiding happiness, Richard, no vain and empty-headed heiress with the right connections and no shrewish social climber.”

“Hold cousin. Do not say anything that you may regret if that little shrew were to become your cousin. I realize that she has chased after you from the first day she met you. I am not blind to her machinations, but by Jove there is something there that pulls me in, Darce! She is like some real life Scylla, calling to me with her siren song from across every room. I know that you think she is just like that monster, grasping and cold. But she is smart...and bold and...interesting...not at all cold, but rather full of desire,” his cousin looked at him incredulously, “Not that kind of desire, although, now that I think of it, probably that kind of desire too.”

“Just do not let her eat you alive, Richard. Promise me you will take some time to really know her. You have always been one for swift action and jumping into the next adventure. Please, for the love to all things holy, just slow it down.”

The Colonel harrumphed, “I will ask *you* to reconsider whatever prejudicial opinions you have formed against Miss Bingley. Try to view her not through the eyes of a man seeking to avoid entrapment, but through kinder eyes. If you can do this for me, I

promise to look well before leaping, or to slow it down, as you so inelegantly put it.”

The two men shook hands. They walked down from the balcony and across the path leading to the entrance. “I suppose we should join the Bingley’s in the reception line?”

Darcy looked at his cousin in horror, “Have you lost every bit of good sense? Stand in line for endless minutes and greet each and every person who walks through those door-“

He found himself interrupted, “You, my much valued and normally highly intelligent cousin, are forgetting that you have a populace to woo. You will stand at the end of the receiving line with me and will compliment every lady and shake hands with every gentleman who attends the ball, and you will be universally loved for it.”

Darcy heaved the biggest sigh of his life, “If you insist.”

“I do. I also insist that you paste a smile on your face before we even approach Bingley to congratulate him on the general splendor. And make it a smile that is comfortable enough to hold on your face for the entirety of our time in line. Show me.”

“I beg your pardon, Richard?”

“Show me your smile.”

“Oh this is ridiculous. I know how to smile. I smile quite well, thank you. I have in point of fact, received compliments on how well I look when I smile.”

“Then let me see your splendid, beaming grin.”

Darcy huffed and cast his cousin a bitter scowl before flashing a toothsome look at him.

“Well that will never do. You look like you are planning on eating all red-cloaked maidens. Again.”

Darcy opened his mouth in a wide-eyed grin.

“No, no, no. Now you look as though you are deranged. A deranged leering lunatic.”

“Oh very well, how is this?” Darcy gave him a slight smile.

“That will do. But allow it to reach your eyes.”

“Pardon me?”

“When one is genuinely happy to see another, the smile is not just a curl of the lips. The eyes crinkle and the cheeks raise. The smile you gave me looks a little pained. Like you have just been seated at dinner between Mrs. Bennet and my lovely Miss Bingley.”

This made Darcy laugh aloud.

“Ah yes, there it is Darcy! Those twinkling eyes will make you irresistible to the ladies and the men feel like a welcomed friends. You are ready to meet the masses.”

Two smartly turned out footmen opened the entrance doors in perfect synchronization as Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam reached the top of the steps.

Old Mr. Nicholls announced in a surprisingly sonorous tone, “Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy of Pemberley in Derbyshire and Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam of the His Royal Highness’s House Guard.”

“Why Darcy, Colonel Fitzwilliam, so good of you to join us this evening. I appreciate the drama of a good entrance, but whatever are you doing outside?” asked Bingley as they stepped into the hall.

“We were admiring the effect of the torches and the candles shining in every window. Your guests will be charmed from the moment their carriages turn into the drive, old man.”

“Thank you, Colonel. I had not thought to catch a glimpse of the house from our guests’ point of view. What an astute observer you are! Tell me, does the exterior satisfy?” Bingley asked with some uneasiness, “Do you feel there is an adequate amount of light?”

“More than adequate, my friend,” answered Darcy, “The lighting lends a very striking effect, and the overall impression is magnificent. Well done. The community as a whole will be delighted with your generosity.”

“Now then,” began the colonel as he reached into his jacket, “I suggest each of you take a swallow, because if I am not mistaken, the first carriage has just crested the hill, and you shall greet you first guest in mere minutes.”

Darcy reached for the proffered flask first and took a hearty pull of the strong spirits. Bingley followed suit, and sputtered, “Lord, what is that stuff?”

“It’s Scotch whiskey, man,” smiled the colonel broadly. “It will help limber your tongue and keep the smile on Darcy’s face.”

“It is quite strong and warming, but I think I will stick with brandy. If you will pardon me a moment gentlemen,” Bingley gestured and Nicholls stepped forward.

“Yes sir? How may I be of assistance?”

“I would greatly appreciate it if you could please have the musicians warm up and please ask Mrs. Nicholls to have the first glasses of champagne and punch ready for guests, and I believe that we should open the...”

As Bingley gave a few more directions to Nicholls, all was lost on the colonel who stood mesmerized, watching intently as Caroline Bingley started down the staircase just over her brother's shoulder. She was stunning. Unaware of the audience below, she moved with a natural grace, less affected than her normal controlled glide, and her countenance reflected her hurry rather than the adapted air of polite boredom she normally displayed to the world at large.

Colonel Fitzwilliam straightened and leaned slightly to the right to better catch each step of the approaching woman. He was unaware of Darcy's attention at his side, who, upon noting his cousin's shift in direction, began observing both the observer and the observed, which surprisingly brought a smile to that man's face, "Lovers ever run before the clock, eh Dickie?"

The Colonel kept his eyes forward and refused to rise to his cousin's salvo. "If her haste could be attributed to a desire to be found sooner in my presence, I would be a happy man indeed. Look at her now Darcy, and tell me that she is not breathtaking," he paused and finished, "but I believe she hurries to take her place beside her brother to greet their guests."

As she reached the turn in the staircase and stepped onto the landing to make her final descent, Caroline's halted as she saw the three men gathered below. Her gaze quickly roamed over Bingley and Nicholls, then Darcy and noticeably lingered on the colonel, who openly stared at her in appreciation. She continued down in a more stately manner, but the roses in her cheeks betrayed her practiced poise.

Nicholls nodded to Bingley, and Charles turned back towards his friends, noticing his sister for the first time, "Caroline, there you are! I had hoped you would be down sooner to view the result of your efforts, but no matter. Netherfield looks amazing...and you look very pretty, sister."

Darcy and the colonel both made a little strangled sound, "Charles!" exclaimed Darcy, startling the colonel out of his reverie, "even I can recognize that your compliment is too tepid." He turned and faced Caroline, "Let me be the first to compliment you on your appearance, or at least issue the first worthy compliment." He shook his head at Charles, "Never before have I seen such a gown with a more becoming and perfect use of feathers. Your gown is as beautiful as it is unusual. You present a breathtaking vision, Miss Bingley," Darcy finished with a very pointed bow in her direction.

Miss Bingley offered a deep curtsy to the group, during which the delicately downy feather-embellished overskirt to her gown gently billowed first up then down, the effect being that the owner nearly floated on air. Caroline, well-pleased with the compliment, blushed lightly. "I thank you, Mr. Darcy, for your kind words. My maid Blanchet is a wonder, and she has my endless gratitude for this remarkable creation. All compliments are owed to her."

Darcy tilted his head slightly and offered her the most approving look he had ever sent her way, "Then I shall tell her of my admiration for her fine work when I see her next."

Colonel Richard Fitzwilliam prided himself on being a man of limitless social grace, blessed with an ability to hold a engaging conversation with anyone, from any station in life. His politically minded father and socially elevated mother certainly tutored him in the art of small talk, with time spent in stables in his youth and now amongst the troops rounding out his skills. But all the training in the world did not properly prepare him for being faced with a woman who made his heart beat too fast.

He found himself struck dumb, completely unable to form a full sentence much less a charming one. *Angelic? No, too sweet. Sinful? Yes, but nothing he could ever voice aloud. Ethereal? Yes, but she was much more...substantial? No, only a decent compliment when discussing furniture...damn you Darcy for once finding your tongue when mine is completely tied.*

After a seeming eternity of awkwardness on his part, the Colonel firmly grasped her gloved hand and bowed over it. He gave the top of her hand a quick kiss - following all forms of decorum, but just before releasing her, squeezed her fingers in an attempt to convey all of the regard his clumsy tongue would not allow him so say aloud.

Her eyes sparkled at him, and he let himself view her from tip to toe, until Darcy interrupted, "Yes, well shall we queue up to greet your guests, Charles?" Aware that he had perhaps fallen into staring, Colonel Fitzwilliam widened their circle to allow the Hurst's to join their group as they arrived in perfect time to form the receiving line, who were received with further, though more modest, compliments before the group moved to the front of the hall.

"Oh the things I endure for you, Richard."

"It will go quickly, Darce. Unlike the Bingley's and the Hurst's,

we aren't required to greet every family. I am, however, surprised that you have not yet realized that while standing in a receiving line can be quite tiresome, it does alleviate the need to make the more extensive chitchat you would need to engage in if you were simply milling about the room."

Darcy looked surprised then genuinely pleased, "I had not considered it the lesser of two evils..." he flashed his cousin a huge grin, "Thanks for that, Dickie!"

The Arrivals

Sir William Lucas and his brood arrived first. Two gangly sons exited the carriage after their father and assisted Lady Lucas, Charlotte, and Maria from their confines as Sir William enthusiastically greeted Caroline and Charles. Caroline bit back an unkind laugh as the man pumped Charles' hand for an extraordinary amount of time, all the while issuing endless compliments and comparisons to St. James Court. It was really almost embarrassing how effusive he was in his praise.

As uncomfortable as the scene was, rather than finding him ridiculous and rolling her eyes discreetly, Caroline felt a small tug. Something inside seemed to shift a bit and she felt a warmth overtake her. She was proud of what she had accomplished, with the help of Mrs. Nicholls of course, and Louisa. She tilted her head as pudgy fingers enveloped her soft kid-glove covered hands and Sir William bowed deeply before her.

Courtly, absurd deep. For a moment, she found herself staring at his balding, ruddy head. And she had to resist the urge to plant a kiss on his bent head. With a flash the impulse passed as Sir William stood and, still grasping her hand, began repeating his effusions to Caroline directly.

Never mind that he waxed eloquent as his family stood awkwardly behind him, the other five Lucases having already greeted Charles before Sir William had even gotten out his final blandishments. Forget that the man had not even stepped out of the hall and viewed the ballroom in all its splendor.

This man, with his peculiar combination of portentous bombast and genuine geniality had touched her heart. He had offered her profuse compliments, noting each and every detail she had so painstakingly planned. It was overwhelming to feel such authentic appreciation.

She had to choke back a sob, so powerful was her response to his kindness. She feigned a cough to cover her emotions and when she hazarded opening her eyes, she saw the same pudgy fingers offering her a fresh, white handkerchief.

She dabbed her eyes, and pressed the cloth back in his hands, and gave those sausage fingers a squeeze, "Sir William, thank you so very much for gracing us with your presence this evening. It shall be a richer experience with you in attendance.

Sir William beamed with her small praise and moved down the line to repeat his greetings to the Hurst's. Lady Lucas took his place and offered her compliments in a slightly more reserved manner, followed by a very respectably polite and less effusive Charlotte, an overwhelmed Maria, a shy and stumbling Aaron, and finally the obnoxious heir of Lucas Lodge, Percival the Handsy.

The rawboned young man before her bowed just as deeply as his father before him, but upon rising pulled her hand to his lips and held it there overlong. She hazarded a glance towards her sister who was shaking with unvented mirth as young Lucas expounded upon her beauty, "Mr. Percival Lucas... your humble servant, Miss Bingley, just like that knight gallant of yore. May I say how ravishing you look this evening?" His eager gaze roved up and down her body, landing on her feathered bodice. "You are like a downy chick...a guinea hen running swiftly through the night...a feathered Madonna..."

"Mr. Lucas thank you so much," she snatched back her hand and held it behind her back, "Have you had the opportunity to greet Mrs. Hurst this evening? I believe she still has an open dance available, and how horrible to think that your host's sister to be forced to sit out for even one dance this evening..." she gestured down the line towards her sister.

Louisa widened her eyes in disbelief at her sister's betrayal.

Percival Lucas reluctantly moved on and Caroline watched with a wicked smirk as her sister unsuccessfully attempted to disengage from Mr. Lucas before he requested a set. The Lucas family had backed up once again as Sir William completed his salutations with Mr. Darcy and Colonel Fitzwilliam.

Darcy looked odd somehow, his expression never varying, frozen in a convivial smile, as he exchanged pleasantries with Sir William. Of course, in a contest of genial charm, Darcy could not hope to compete with Colonel Fitzwilliam. The former's natural mien was a reserved one, bordering on arrogance. Caroline had always found it alluring, and had considered Darcy's dark looks and unapproachable appearance the height of good breeding.

This evening, she found herself not only baffled by this new

facade of bonhomie, but she also found that when compared to his cousin's natural outgoing good graces, Mr. Darcy's appeal suffered.

This startling consideration left her feeling like a bent carriage wheel — out of alignment and almost wobbly. She found herself staring at both men as Colonel Fitzwilliam most graciously complimented both Charlotte and Maria Lucas on their appearance and then asked them each for a dance. He was all comfortable laughter and kindness, bestowing his full attention upon each person in turn as they moved down the line, not as stiff as Mr. Darcy beside him or as ungovernably enthusiastic as her brother Charles beside her. Charles possessed the same friendly nature, but was so impatient to spread his good cheer that he at times gave the impression of beginning the next greeting before completing the last one.

Caroline suspected that tonight, at least, his distraction was due to the imminent arrival of the beautiful Jane Bennet. She suspected that Charles fancied himself quite in love this time. Of course, he had professed to have the most perfect “angel” in the past at exhibitions, in ballrooms, at dinners and teas. But somehow this time her brother seemed more earnest in his slightly quieter admiration of Miss Bennet. And Caroline could not approve of being allied with such a connectionless bunch of bumpkins.

As she mulled over these thoughts, the next two carriages arrived and spilled out their riders in a frothy tide of lace and shoe polish as middle Hertfordshire turned up in all its country finery. But Caroline could not be stirred to think too poorly of her guests after Sir William's hearty expression of appreciation. Rather, she felt oddly inclined to encourage more familiarity with these newcomers to see if any of them would create the same feelings of warmth in her as did the Lucas patriarch.

* * *

The whinging could be heard even before the door had been opened by the footman. “You are stepping on my wrapper!”

"I did no such thing! You are crowding me. If your wrapper is under my slipper it is your fault for pushing me so!" came the cross retort as the door opened to the latest arrivals.

Lydia Bennet straightened her back and pushed out her chest as she stood in the doorway, tossing her own wrapper dramatically over her shoulder as she simultaneously threw a capelette to the startled footman who let go of the door to catch the garment.

She entered with a step that could only be described as frolicsome and hopped in front of Charles, followed by a pink-cheeked and breathless Catherine Bennet.

Lydia made the deepest curtsey imaginable and held it so long it caused Caroline to look down the line where she saw the Hursts' mirrored expressions of alarm, Colonel Fitzwilliam with an amused grin on his face, and Mr. Darcy whose mouth had actually strayed from its frozen smile to a slightly open look of disbelief.

She turned back in time to see that Miss Catherine had followed suit. Charles stood somewhat awkwardly with hand outstretched waiting for the girls to look up from their genuflection.

"Miss Lydia, Miss Kitty!" Caroline prompted in an effort to bring an end to the scene, "I am delighted to see you."

The girls bobbed up as one giggling all the way, and Lydia replied, "Mr. Bingley, Miss Bingley we have been so terribly eager to arrive at your ball! Why with all the rain lately I was sure this evening would never come about at all!"

"It is most agreeable to be here at Netherfield," gushed Miss Catherine, "I do love a ball!"

"Kitty!" hissed Lydia loudly enough for even Mr. Darcy to hear at the end of the line, "*I have not finished. You are always interrupting.*"

Charles intervened before Kitty could react to her sister's chastisement, as he took one of each of hands in his own, lightly grasping their fingers in an absurdly elegant manner, "The evening was only lacking your attendance, ladies," he smoothly distracted them from further squabbling, "you are most welcome to Netherfield Hall!"

He bowed over each of their hands and abruptly turned to greet Miss Mary Bennet who stood in the entrance, frowning at her sisters.

Miss Catherine jostled in front of her younger sister, and greeted Caroline with giggling enthusiasm moved swiftly down the line,

quickly bobbing up and down in a tangible eagerness to reach the ballroom.

Miss Lydia however, was surprisingly not one to be rushed along, as she was enjoying the sensation of being the center of attention. Ten curious eyes rested on her as she curtsied once in front of Caroline, though not so deeply and while keeping her own eyes firmly on Caroline's person.

Caroline responded in kind, offering Lydia a full curtsy while trying not to stare at the young girl's overflowing...charms, which were even more pronounced this evening as the neckline of her pale pink gown featured a border of cerise ribbon and an intricate pattern of cerise stitching...naturally drawing the eye. *That is simply unfair*, Caroline sighed as she rose.

Lydia gracefully swooped to her feet and stood staring keenly at Caroline.

"That is an extraordinarily wonderful gown you are wearing, Miss Bingley. You look like a fairy princess...or the queen of the swans."

Caroline's eyes opened wide in surprise.

"I know that it is not the thing to speak of another's appearance, but I just had to say something. You are in truly exceptional looks this evening. I have never seen anything like your gown, and if I did not so admire you, I would be quite put out that you will steal the notice of all of the soldiers tonight."

Caroline hovered between being abashed and wanting to laugh, having been spoken to so directly by one...well, by anyone outside her family, but then again it was Lydia Bennet. She smiled warmly at her and in that moment felt genuine affection for a brash girl who had no business being out in the world. "Miss Lydia, I shall simply say thank you for your compliments, and if I may offer one of my own, you look positively lovely this evening. Cerise is most becoming on you."

She shrugged, "I saw you wearing a similar color at the Goulding's card party. I thought it more interesting than the plain white my mother prefers me to wear."

"Now that is a true compliment, Miss Lydia. The officers will find you too tempting by far." She leaned closer and lowered her voice, "Promise me that you will remember our discussion."

"I shall Miss Bingley, but it will be ever so difficult to maintain an air of mystery when I so desperately want to be popular," Lydia

whispered back, looking miserable for but a moment, then it quickly passed, "but I will try it tonight. If it does not please me, then I can simply be lively tomorrow."

Caroline smiled, "You will never found dull, Miss Lydia, even as you present a mysterious face to the world at large."

Lydia glowed with the praise from Miss Bingley and made her way down the rest of the receiving line in a much more respectably sedate manner.

Miss Mary Bennet had little to say for herself and looked as if she would rather not be there, much as Mr. Darcy looked if you caught him unawares. She halloed the others and clutching some music sheets under her arm, made her way down the hall to the ballroom.

"Oh Mr. Bingley! How magnificent Netherfield Hall looks, and what a fine night for a ball - why I do believe I have never seen finer weather after such a rain. I thought that we would be washed away, and my girls could not even walk into Meryton for shoe roses. Of course, my Jane does look very well this evening, even without the shoe roses, but then I always say that-"

"Good evening, Mr. Bingley, Miss Bingley." Mr Bennet interjected while Mrs. Bennet took a breath. "We are pleased to attend your ball this evening." He finished, and steered his wife down to greet the Hursts before she could resume her dialogue. Mr. Bennet then picked up, "How good of you to provide my family with a distraction from their daily reflections and give them such an extraordinary event upon which to focus their every thought..."

Caroline's attention shifted from the dry wit of the Bennet patriarch to her brother who was stumbling over his tongue beside her, "Miss Bennet! You have come. I mean how good of you to come. I have been waiting for you...which means to say, I have been looking forward to you this evening, to seeing you that is. You are so...it is so kind of you to come to our party."

Caroline glanced up at the ceiling to avoid showing delight in her brother's obvious discomposure. She schooled her features and stepped closer to Charles. "Miss Bennet," she dropped into an easy curtsey and smiled at Jane Bennet. She could not resist quickly measuring up Miss Bennet's appearance. Jane Bennet was such a naturally beautiful girl.

Her face was ever unclouded, the lady herself eager to please and be pleased by each and everyone surrounding her. To Caroline's

mind such a gentle disposition was not natural, or at least certainly not healthy. How could anyone be so ridiculously tranquil?

Her figure was made for the current fashionably high waist lines and light fabrics. Miss Bennet's icy blue silken ballgown had a fine overskirt, in a matching tone, which was shot through with silver thread, and her light hair woven with matching ribbons in a cascade of soft curls. Modestly sparkling earbobs set off the look perfectly and drew the eye to the curve of her long neck. She was, in short, perfect. The very angel of her brother's oft spoken dreams.

Jane Bennet returned Caroline's curtsy and greeted her with all the warmth of a dear friend, and Charles quickly took her gloved hand in his before she could move on, and repeated how delighted he was and delightful she was until Miss Bennet gently extracted herself and glided to the Hursts, exchanging a surprisingly warm embrace with Louisa.

Before Caroline could complete her examination of that welcome, she was interrupted by her brother's loud throat clearing. She turned to face him and began to scold, but then caught herself, as she found herself opposite Mr. Darcy's impertinent love interest, Miss Eliza Bennet.

Caroline's eyebrow shot up - she could not help herself - as she took in Miss Elizabeth's person. She glowed like a pearl. Perhaps that was an exaggeration, but if so, not by much. A profusion of dark locks were set off with a constellation of large pearl pins, and her ivory satin gown seemed to illuminate the space around her, like she was made of moonlight. Her rosy cheeks spoke of health and good humor, and Caroline did not need to look behind her to know that Mr. Darcy stood transfixed.

"Good evening, Miss Bingley," Elizabeth spoke with that familiar lilt, the one where she sounded perpetually amused, sounding as if she were welcoming Caroline instead of the other way around.

"Miss Eliza Bennet. Welcome to our celebration. We are so...so happy that you will partake in the revelry and add your own sparkling wit to the gathering."

The ladies made their curtsies and Caroline watched with something like a sting as both Jane and Elizabeth Bennet were well received by the others in her own group. Her sister was clearly fond of Jane Bennet, and was kind to Eliza. Even Hurst was stirred to greater attention when speaking to the Bennet Beauties this evening.

But that little tug of betrayal was nothing to the stab of jealousy she felt as she heard Colonel Fitzwilliam ask Miss Eliza for a set.

Can she not be satisfied with the Pemberley half of Derbyshire? Must she now covet the Matlock side of the county as well.

Charles quickly stepped to the end of the line to exchange one last word with his angel, Jane. Caroline felt extremely de trop, as she stood some paces from the knot of easy conversation and laughter. She turned her back on the happy gathering, resenting... what? Those fresh country misses? The loss of the dream of being the Mistress of Pemberley? The defection of her siblings?

No. Those things were just small bits. The piece that really mattered was that Colonel Fitzwilliam appeared to genuinely enjoy his harmless little flirtation with those beautiful Bennets. She had not the words to describe how that made her feel. It was quite beyond her.

Caroline did not know where to look. Not at the men so smitten with those Bennet sisters. Not at the footmen flanking the entrance doors, just salivating for a tidbit of gossip to share with the rest of the staff at the end of the night.

And so Caroline shook off one of her gloves and pretended great fascination with one of the fingers, picking at an imaginary string, until at last the door opened again to admit the next group of guests.

Un Coup de Foudre

Never before had she been so grateful for the kindness of relative strangers.

That next group of guests thankfully managed to push the lingering Bennet sisters into the ballroom, as they could have no good reason for holding up the line. With the removal of Eliza Bennet's glowing laughs and Jane Bennet's nearly oppressive kindness, Caroline quickly regained her composure. Greeting guests properly did not allow for the sulks, and a quick succession of late-comers lifted Caroline's spirits with their good will and fine remarks on the...well, on everything really.

Endless minutes of smiling, nodding encouragingly, small talk, and curtsies would normally have given Caroline a headache, but upon a quick examination, she found herself confounded yet captivated. She felt untethered - as light and airy as the downy feathers on her overskirt, floating along on gentle currents of air.

The compliments! Those ceaseless, sincere, and absolutely delicious compliments! The people of Meryton and Longbourn village may not be people of style, but they were genuine in their abundant praise. And praise they did - nothing escaped the notice of her guests - she received words of admiration on everything from the pearls in her ears to the torches on the drive. It was the most authentic outpouring of positive sentiments Caroline had ever heard. And she found it intoxicating.

* * *

As the last couple moved on to greet the Hursts, Mr. Nicholls informed Charles and Caroline that there were no more carriages waiting in line, and that with the exception of a few of the soldiers

from the -Militia, all of the families on the list of invitees had been accounted for.

Charles bounced away immediately, presumably in search of Miss Bennet, without so much as a thanks or begging your pardon. Down the line, Louisa and Bernard looked in need of some refreshment, Mr. Darcy looked as though he might fall over if she as much as fanned him with a feather, so overcome was he with the fatigue of speaking to each and every person in attendance. Colonel Fitzwilliam alone looked as fresh as he had when she descended the stairs.

The couple, the Cramptons...or was it Frampton, or even Brampton...oh how could she forget so soon...they were just announced by Nicholls! At any rate, Alice and Reginald whatever-their-ampton, were as old as the hills, and the stooped Mr. Reginald CraFraBrampton spoke so slowly that he seemed to forget the beginning of his sentence before he could reach the end.

She had been fortunate enough to escape with a kindly nod and kiss to her hand from Mr. CFBrampton, although for a moment she was alarmed that he may not be able to right himself from his short bow. The Hurst's greeted the couple with a quick flurry of "Good evenings" and "so good of you to attends" before Bernard took Louisa's arm and whisked her away to the punch table.

Caroline watched to see how Colonel Fitzwilliam and Mr. Darcy would fair with the couple. Colonel Fitzwilliam grasped Mrs. 'amptons hand, "It is such a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Mr. And Mrs. Frampton."

Frampton!

"Just yesterday I heard Colonel Forster speaking of your son who also serves his majesty as a cavalryman. May I ask if he is in training or has he already been assigned to unit?"

Mrs. Frampton replied, "Good evening, sir. It is a indeed a pleasure meeting you too. We are staunch admirers of all men who serve King and Country, but we are now, as you might imagine, most positively inclined to prefer those who ride to those who march," she beamed at the Colonel appreciatively.

Mr. Frampton stepped forward, "My boy is in training, sir... down in London." This took Mr. Frampton some time to get out and appeared to take a bit of his strength as well. "He is...he is to be assigned to a unit heading to the...Peninsula."

The Colonel's good cheer slipped a bit, and he offered the

Frampton a more melancholy smile, "I have been to the Peninsula myself. Things are looking up there, but the Spanish forces most certainly need the assistance of good British soldiers if they are to defeat Napoleon." His smile widened a bit, "If you can believe it, the home office has assigned several fearsome old men like me to train the new recruits and impart our tactical wisdom. Your son is in good hands with these men, and he will go to the Peninsula well prepared to face what he must. I was just there myself before venturing to Hertfordshire on leave."

"What a most extraordinary coincidence, to meet you here Colonel. As a mother who loves her son, I must tell you how much I appreciate your kind words," she took his hand and pressed it lightly, "he is our youngest, the last to leave the nest, and my heart stops to think of him in battle."

Mr. Frampton took her hand and placed it on his own arm, covering it reassuringly with his other hand, "Now Alice...every man must make his way in the world, especially...the youngest sons."

Colonel Fitzwilliam turned to Darcy, "Darcy!"

Mr. Darcy shifted to face his cousin with a lifted eyebrow, "Yes Richard?"

"Let me present to you Mr. and Mrs. Frampton. I believe Mrs. Frampton would appreciate a cup of that punch Bingley was raving of earlier. If you would be so kind as to escort them in, I believe I owe my arm to Miss Bingley who awaits me patiently," he tilted his head to indicate Miss Bingley who was standing off to the side behind them.

"Your servant," Mr. Darcy gave his cousin a short bow, and offered his arm to Mrs. Frampton whose face lit up with the delight of a woman making an entrance into the ballroom with a man on either arm. One of whom was young, handsome, and decidedly wealthier than any other gentleman of her acquaintance. Darcy leaned his long frame to better hear the couple as they slowly progressed to the ballroom, his rich voice carrying down the hall a contrast to the quiet rasp of Mr. Frampton.

The Colonel watched them walk away with a smile on his face, then turned as Miss Bingley stepped up to his side.

"You were very kind to the Framptons."

"Not very kind, I am afraid. It is difficult for me to offer encouraging words about battles and war. I feel that I have seen as

many young men die in battle as live to fight another day... But come, this is no talk for a ballroom. Let us join the celebration, if you feel free to leave off greeting any late guests?"

"Oh I believe any late-comers will find their way to the ballroom well enough," she smiled at him and took his arm.

"Then let us go," he started at a slow pace, "You need punch, and I am still in need of a partner for the opening set. And I find myself in arrears to you."

"How is that, Colonel?"

"I was so taken with your appearance earlier, that I found myself tongue-tied."

Caroline felt her cheeks redden with the compliment, "I thank you, sir. Consider your debt of offering your host the appropriate praise as paid in full."

He stopped walking.

"Miss Bingley, let me rephrase and to be clear, these are not words of grateful appreciation from a guest to his hostess. This is a man telling a woman that she is so beautiful that she has stolen his ability to speak," he paused and waited for her to look up at him. "You are, Miss Bingley, breathtaking. Not angelic, like some fresh-faced young miss in her first season. You can be as fierce as a valkyrie and as beguiling as a siren. You are exquisite."

With that the Colonel left her side and walked into the ballroom. He looked once more over his shoulder at her, and disappeared into the assembled crowd.

Caroline watched him go, her cheeks flaming and mind in a jumble. She stared vacantly at the scene before her as she consulted her varied emotions. She was keenly aware that she was standing alone and was not at all pleased that Colonel Fitzwilliam had left her to find another partner for the opening set. She stood frozen for another moment until an exuberant shriek from a bouncing and clapping Lydia Bennet pulled her from her reverie.

Suddenly, Caroline found that she could not suppress a toothsome grin from spreading across her face. Nor did she particularly want to do so. She felt drunk with happiness and did not care if it was on display before the entire society of Meryton in Hertfordshire.

He had called her beautiful. And if she was not mistaken, that undefinable feeling of irritation and vexation that had plagued her over the past week suddenly came into sharp focus. She, Caroline

Arabella Bingley, was in love.

An Apology Offered and Accepted

“Where have you been, sister? Our guests are growing restless, or perhaps I am growing restless, but frankly my feet long to move to the music. Are you quite ready to address our guests with me and begin the dancing? Darcy does not know what to do with himself as he and Miss Bennet stand waiting for us, and I do not want to leave them struggling to make polite conversation for a moment longer.” Bingley fired off one question after another to his sister, as he took her arm and dragged her further into the room.

“Wait, Charles wait!” Caroline cried breathlessly as he pulled her up the side of the room, he waving and greeting guests all the way, she struggling to keep up as he moved them ever forward.

“Stop!” she hissed, “I wish to make an entrance, not a spectacle.”

Bingley stopped abruptly and Caroline ran into his side as he turned to face her, “Oh, excuse me Caroline!” She leaned into her brother’s arm to steady herself, and rolled her eyes at him as she recovered her footing. “You are, of course, correct Caroline. Forgive me. In my exuberance to start the festivities...well, I just...I am so excited for this evening to begin! Our first ball, Caroline!” He looked at his sister with wary hopefulness.

She looked at her brother quizzically for a moment and then smiled warmly at him. “Mother and father would be very proud of you, Charles.” She squeezed his arm in a somewhat awkward half-embrace. “I am rather excited myself, truth be told. But please, let us both savor this moment and move a bit more elegantly. After all, there will only ever be one *first* ball, Charles,” she flashed him a huge grin, and he immediately responded in kind.

“Why Caroline, I never realized how perfectly straight and bright your teeth are,” he said with some surprise.

She stretched her head towards him and inspected him closely. “Yours are smallish, just like mine, but brother, let me tell you... you possess the winningest smile I have ever beheld.” Her eyes were

suspiciously glittering, as he grabbed her hand once more.

"Thank you, Caroline, and thank you for putting together such an amazing display," he gestured to the room in general with his free hand, "mamma would have loved this." He turned to her and your appearance tonight is most singular. You are so very pretty. Your dress is so unusual and so fantastical...with these feathers you look like—"

"An angel?" she interrupted.

"No. You are, well, don't take this the wrong way, but you would be more of a—"

"Devil?"

"No! Not at all a devil. Perhaps you have been at times a bit devilish," he smiled at her, "but I was thinking of you tonight as more of an archangel. A sort of swift moving and acting warrior angel. You play the harp marvelously, but I cannot imagine you walking around on clouds all day, contentedly strumming a lyre and looking sweet. What was your inspiration for your borrowed feathers?"

Caroline laughed out loud. "Well, I suppose my past actions are more in the vein of an archangel, so I understand you not placing me in the same rank as your Miss Bennet." He looked as if he might interject. "Do not worry, Charles, I do promise not to smite any of your guests tonight, including Miss Bennet. I will be on my best behavior. You have my word."

He smiled, "Please do refrain from smiting. And they are our guests, Caroline, not just my guests. How could anyone possibly even consider smiting anyone as kind as Miss Bennet? But please do be kind to all of the Bennets, if you can. I know that you do not favor them, but they are the most prominent family in the area."

"Very well. I shall make nice to one and all, even Eliza Bennet." She tilted her head, "You asked about inspiration, and since we are having such an open discussion, I must confess that you and Mr. Darcy provided the inspiration for these feathers."

He looked confused, "How so?"

"I heard you. I heard both of you. As you were playing billiards. Discussing me." she finished softly.

Bingley's eyes widened in surprise and then he looked sheepish, "Oh Caro..." he started.

"No Charles. I believe I understand. I have given you reason to think poorly of me...on more than one occasion." She ducked her

head, "I know that you, that Mr. Darcy...well, that you both feel I have acted the fool in chasing after him..." Caroline met her brothers eyes in a wistful gaze, "but you must know that I only ever wanted stability. Stability and connection."

Charles frowned slightly and made to speak.

"No, please let me finish or I may never find the desire for such reflection again. As you know it is not in my nature to look at my own behavior with a critical eye." The siblings exchanged a gentle smile at such a rare self-deprecating remark from Caroline. "I want you to understand that I craved the immediate respectability that being Mrs. Darcy would grant me. By uttering two simple words, 'I do,' I would magically transform from an upstart in well-made clothes to one of the upper ten percent. No one would dare slight me for being the daughter of a tradesman, question aloud my attendance at a party or ball."

"But Caroline, you know that--"

She grasped one of Bingley's hands in both of hers, "Wait, just one more moment, please." Bingley nodded, and she continued, "I know that you would admonish me to ignore such comments, to be friendlier, to be content with what I have and not grasp for something grander. But until now, I had not thought that contentment was within my nature or reach."

Bingley looked slightly perplexed, "But what has cha--"

"Really Charles, be patient! I am almost finished, and before you ask anything and before the ball opens, I absolutely must tell you two things."

"You have my full attention, Caroline. I never imagined that would be so in a ballroom full of such pleasant people and lovely distractions, but I am listening."

"Thank you, Charles. First, I am sorry that I have been so troublesome to you." She held up a hand to cut off his imminent dissent. "No, I heard you speaking with Mr. Darcy, and all of society knows that it is hoped that a match will be made at the end of any young lady's first season. How could a young man of two and twenty years possibly want to be perpetually saddled with a younger sister? Of course you hope to marry me off, Charles." She held aloft a single finger to forestall her brother from rebutting her comment and rushed out the next words.

"It is my hope to marry as well. I do not wish to forever be dependent upon you or the Hursts. And that is at least partially

why, and please let me get this out before interrupting, that is why Mr. Darcy is so appealing to me. If I were Mrs. Darcy, not only would I gain status and respect, but I would also be fully independent without fear that my husband would fritter away my small fortune. Mr. Darcy has no need of my dowry. My pin money as Mrs. Darcy would be enough to cover all my practical needs and impractical desires.

“And best of all, Charles, you and Louisa would always be a part of my life, as Mr. Darcy welcomes you, and subsequently us, everywhere at any time.”

“But Caroli—”

“But Charles,” she mimicked his tone and pulled a face of exaggerated frustration before breaking out in a wide smile. “I shall no longer pursue Mr. Darcy. It has been made abundantly clear that he does not favor making a match with me. I dare say if she would simply open her eyes and realize that they are ridiculously suited to one another, Mr. Darcy would readily enter into a courtship with Eliza Bennet.” Caroline let out a small huff but then stopped herself while Charles’ forehead creased in thought.

“The whole thing is beyond explication, but that is neither here nor there. Which brings me to my final point. I must apologize to you, Charles.” She dropped her eyes and colored slightly. “I have tried to influence and order your life to suit me best. And I have just realized that I can no more control you than you can restrain me. We, each of us, can be willful it seems...but more than that, I believe that the heart wants what the heart wants.

“As much as I would prefer your heart to have decided upon the daughter of an earl or a docile little heiress like Georgiana Darcy, it appears that you have irretrievably fallen for Miss Bennet. Not only have I been unsupportive of your choice,” again she held her hand up to forestall another interruption, “but I have also been unkind to Miss Bennet, as I attempted to persuade her that she was unworthy of your attentions.”

Bingley looked stern and raised an eyebrow at his sister.

Caroline refrained from rolling her eyes, “For the longest time I had questioned your choice, and thought, why must it be a Bennet, Charles? Why could my brother not find your joy in someone more...more...”

Charles raised his brow and frowned deeply at his sister then cut off her speech before she could find the offensive words he was

certain would follow, "Yes, Caroline. It must. Jane is much more than simply a Bennet. She is the kindest, mildest, most beautiful woman I have ever seen. If you have yet considered it, sister, I beg you to see that for all the fault you find in them, each and every Bennet is above us in status." Now he held up a hand to hold off any protestations, "It is true, Caroline.

"The Bennets have held their land for...well forever. Miss Jane Bennet is the great-great-great-great granddaughter of a gentleman, while I am the son of a ship-builder. If I am so fortunate as to align myself with the Bennet family, to gain the love and affection of that most lovely Jane Bennet, I will consider myself the luckiest man in the world." He paused for a moment, "And society at large will consider it an equal match; I have greater wealth, she is of greater consequence."

"I know. I know this, Charles. I was trying to explain..." he cocked his head as Caroline quivered slightly then continued, "I am heartily ashamed my conduct concerning Miss Bennet, as Jane Bennet is indeed lovely girl. She has been remarkably kind to me despite my efforts to make her uncomfortable, and it is quite obvious to me that she admires you. A great deal. I am sorry, Charles, and if you will allow me, will attempt to make amends... both to you and to Miss Bennet."

Charles held his frown for but a second longer then a shy grin spread across his face. "You really think she admires me?" he asked, the tips of his reddened ears betraying his usual self-doubt.

"Oh yes Charles, I really do. I believe that Miss Bennet is more than fond of you. Though she smiles at everyone, she only blushes when she smiles at you," Caroline looked at her brother warmly, "and she positively glows when you smile back at her. It is subtle, but it is there if you observe her closely. And though Jane Bennet is always a good listener, she her attention is most discernibly fixed when your name is mentioned or when you are speaking."

Bingley waited for Caroline to continue.

"That is all, Charles. I felt I owed you a longer explanation, but the material points are that I apologize for my poor behavior, I am no longer interested in engaging Mr. Darcy's affections, and I promise to be a better sister to you and friend to Miss Bennet."

He looked at his sister for a moment longer and then squeezed her in a tight embrace. Just as quickly as he had scooped her into his arms, Charles pushed her to arms length and stared intently at

her. "Thank you, Caroline. Not just for your apology which I fully accept and am grateful for, but also for accounting for your inexplicable conduct. I have never fully understood your stubborn determination." Bingley paused.

"I now know that I would have been better served by asking you why you go about the way you do rather than simply attempting to change you. It appears I too owe you an apology. I am sorry, sister, for not trying to know you better," Charles said as he rubbed her arm awkwardly.

Caroline looked down as her eyes welled a bit, "Yes, well perhaps we could spend a bit more time together, if you are so inclined. I like to ride you know."

"Yes, I do know that. Tomorrow morning I plan to leave for London for just a few days as I must meet with my man of business, but perhaps when I return we could organize a hunt."

"Or we could simply ride out with just one another."

Charles beamed at her, "That is the better idea, Caroline." He frowned slightly, "But if you do not find it an impertinence, why, may I ask, have you made such a...such a...how is it that you have decided to change your course, as it were...so suddenly?"

Caroline smiled widely at her brother, "Well Charles, I cannot I cannot fix on the hour, or the spot, or the look, or the words, which laid the foundation. It is all so confusing, and I was in the middle before I knew that I had begun...but I believe that I am...that I have...that my heart is..." Caroline colored becomingly and lowered her voice to a whisper, "I believe that I have fallen love!"

Charles grin matched his sister's, and they stood for a moment smiling at one another, "Well that is remarkable, Caroline. And does the Colonel return your sentiments?"

"Charles! How could you know?"

"My dear Caro. I assure you that I am perfectly capable of accomplishing simple arithmetic. And although I am admittedly impulsive at times, that does not preclude being observant. You have fancied him since he arrived."

"Charles!"

"Well it is true, Caroline. I have never seen you so jittery as you have been in his presence," he finished with a laugh. "I do hope that you have promised him a dance tonight, Caroline."

"I have agreed to both the supper set and the final dance...it feels almost scandalous!"

Charles sighed, "If I could dance every dance with Miss Bennet tonight, I surely would."

* * *

Caroline was silent.

"If I may be so bold, Caroline..."

"Yes, brother?"

"Endeavor to display your true feelings and your true self to Colonel Fitzwilliam tonight. I believe he is one to appreciate a more direct approach."

"Thank you, Charles! I believe that is the best advice you have ever offered me."

The two grinned at one another once again, and Bingley nodded his head towards the musicians, "And now sister, do you think we should open the dancing? If you look up front, I believe you will see that the lovely Miss Bennet and a fidgety Mr. Darcy await us."

Caroline shifted her gaze and saw Mr. Darcy standing beside Miss Bennet — she the picture of calm sweetness as he stood beside her with that nearly maniacal grin he had worn during the receiving line. "By all means, brother. It is quite past time for us to begin anew," she felt him squeeze her hand and they exchanged a little smile, then Caroline finished, "And I believe your Miss Bennet needs rescuing from Mr. Darcy. She appears amiable as always, but he looks as though he is close to expiring from a mania of some sort."

A Not-as-Grand-as-Hoped Opening

The moment came and went with nary a thrill, no particular sense of particular satisfaction. Oh to be sure Caroline did enjoy the sensation of dancing with a most excellent partner. Mr. Darcy was, after all, skilled, athletic, and true to form when dancing - each of his steps was executed to an almost mechanical precision - one could not ask for a more exemplary partner.

After escorting her to Mr. Darcy's side, Charles stood between Caroline and Miss Bennet and made his remarks... thank you and welcome, and so on and so forth, as Caroline did her best to appear supportive and happy - though she did feel that his standing in such proximity to Miss Bennet as he addressed their guests was as good as declaring his attentions to that lady along with his gratitude. *Charles was so rash in so many ways...* she stopped herself from completing the thought with a shake of her head, and sighed aloud as she quietly mumbled, "And I will support his decision to court Jane Bennet."

She stood in front of the punch table, absently sipping at her cup as she observed the room before her. The dancers chatted with great energy amongst themselves, invigorated by the activity and the anticipation of their next chance to twirl and prance. Knots of matrons and their squires stood likewise talking and laughing around the edges, leaving the now merely dusty looking floor to the younger set, while enjoying the festive atmosphere and the chance to meet with one another in a grander fashion than their small sitting rooms.

She could not keep from smiling as she reflected on the first set, but not for any reason she would have ever anticipated. Her brother had unexpectedly bowed deeply to her and Mr. Darcy and stepped aside with a wink. To their guests, it appeared a magnanimous gesture, a courtly acknowledgement of Mr. Darcy's higher rank, and an honor bestowed upon a cherished sister, but all parties involved knew better.

Darcy's eyes widened imperceptibly to the room at large, but noticeably to Bingley, Caroline, and even the gentle Jane. That very aristocratic look of hauteur overtook Darcy and his posture grew rigid as he executed a deep bow to Charles in return. Then, much to Caroline's surprise, Mr. Darcy stood upright with what could almost be described as a hop. He had a smile on his face, or a sort of smile, as it was of the pasted on type that never wavered in its intensity.

Darcy executed a perfect bow to Caroline who curtsied gracefully and then took his proffered arm. The room was silent as the pair walked the length of the ballroom, her fingers gently resting on his own with arms extended, the only sound coming from the heels of Darcy's shoes. Caroline hazarded a glimpse at her dance partner, and almost laughed aloud at his doll-like mask. "Come now, Mr. Darcy," she pitched her voice for his ears alone as she clearly tried to hold back her mirth, "if I were to paint your face white and your lips red, the good people of Meryton and Longbourn might ask you to perform a Harlequinade at their children's birthday parties."

His eyebrows pulled together slightly and the wild, beatific smile faltered. "Are you calling me a clown, Miss Bingley."

"Yes Mr. Darcy, I am." She cocked an eyebrow at him, "You are most definitely acting the clown. As good as Joey in a Drury Lane pantomime...but it will not help you in winning the heart of Eliza Bennet." Then she did let out a small laugh as his frozen grin dropped completely and the tips of his ears flamed scarlet.

He whipped his head to face her, "What do you mean by that, Miss Bingley?"

"Mean, Mr. Darcy? Well, I believe it is quite obvious that you find Miss Elizabeth lovely and engaging. I also believe that you are attempting to...gain her good opinion with this..." she turned her eyes forward as she feared that she would fall into an uncontrollable torrent of laughter if she continued to watch Mr. Darcy attempt to school his features, "...with your display of...merriment."

They had reached the top of the dance floor, close to the assembly of musicians, as Charles and Jane Bennet were stepping lively over the center of the floor, followed by Louisa and Bernard.

"Miss Bingley," Darcy looked at her most earnestly as he spoke softly, "I have no desire to act the clown..." his eyes shifted to the approaching Bingley and Miss Bennet, "how should I...what would

you...how might I..."

Caroline took pity on him, "How might you gain Miss Elizabeth's regard?" He nodded his head in one resolute motion as he squeezed his eyes shut. "It is simple, really Mr. Darcy. Like all ladies, she would appreciate a compliment, and so I would recommend you start there. It must, however, be a true compliment of a quality you admire in her and must be given most sincerely." She smiled warmly at him, "And you must absolutely drop that atrocious grin you have been wearing all evening."

For the first time in the history of their acquaintance, Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy smiled back at Caroline. A heartfelt, genuine smile too — the kind he frequently exchanged with her brother.

"That is much better, Mr. Darcy!" she laughed. "Oh, and you must tease her."

"Tease her, Miss Bingley?" he said with some alarm.

"Yes, tease her. Surely you have noted her fondness for teasing and pointed little comments? She herself said that she dearly loves to laugh." Caroline tried to keep the distaste from her voice.

He looked uncertain.

"I promise it will be a simple thing. Just begin with giving yourself over to the evening. I pledged to Charles that I would do the same. Try to enjoy yourself, do not seek to distance yourself from these..." she fluttered a hand through the air, "...people. I have heard you exchange many a pleasant conversation with my brother and your cousin the Colonel. I have even heard you joke with them. You could do the same with others this evening."

He looked unconvinced.

She smiled widely at him in what she considered an encouraging way, "You could follow the example of Charles. He enjoys everyone he meets, everywhere he visits, and smiles nearly as much as his Miss Bennet. I suggest you may begin with this dance and practice being charming with me."

Now he looked dubious.

"Mr. Darcy. Do not mistake my words. I do understand that it is not like that with us...that I understand you would not consider me..." She ducked her head in embarrassment. "In addition to promising Charles to be pleasant to our guests, I also let him know that I...that my interests are no longer fixed...that I shall not..."

"You told him, perhaps, that you find we would not suit?" Darcy gently offered to ease her discomfort.

Caroline looked up at Mr. Darcy, smiled shyly and cocked her head before answering, "Yes, Mr. Darcy. We would not suit." She paused then finished quietly, "Thank you, Mr. Darcy."

He bowed his head in acknowledgement of their new understanding of one another.

At that moment a glowing Jane Bennet and Charles Bingley skipped into place beside the slightly awkward Caroline and Darcy, respectively.

"Miss Bingley, you have created such a delightful evening! So elegant and charming...everything is just breath-taking!" She leaned in to deliver her last comment, "And I know that it is not done, but I must tell you that your dress is most remarkable. You are beyond what is commonly held as beautiful, Miss Bingley. You are like a fairytale come to life."

The compliments were so natural and sincere from Miss Bennet, that Caroline found herself momentarily at a loss, and felt all of the shame of her earlier behavior towards this most earnest and caring person. Her brother shot her a severely raised eyebrow, as if he expected her to go back upon her promise of moments ago. "I thank you, Miss Bennet," Caroline gave Jane a most heartfelt look, "You are too kind, far kinder than I deserve."

Jane reached out and squeezed Caroline's hand, "I have said nothing which is not true. You have generously given all of us the most splendid evening, and I believe that there is no such thing as too much kindness between friends." Jane Bennet's natural good nature was almost overwhelming to one more accustomed to keeping her true feeling under good regulation.

Caroline squeezed her hand in return and murmured, "Friends. Yes, you are right. There is no such thing as too much kindness between friends. I like that thought very much."

The moment passed, and Jane's attention shifted back to the beaming Charles Bingley, as the line of dancers quickly formed and the musicians struck the first notes. The room filled with tremendous energy. Mr. Darcy bowed deeply from across the line and gave her a wink, and proclaimed, "Well, Miss Bingley, though we might not suit, shall we see if I can at least be suitably charming for the duration of a dance?"

Caroline was taken aback by Mr. Darcy's uninhibited display, and left positively stunned. A throaty laugh escaped her before all of local society. "Why Mr. Darcy! That was absolutely perfectly

charming. Perhaps there is hope for both of us yet.”

He took her hand in his, and they completed the first movements of the dance, then separated as their steps were repeated down through the each of the assembled couples, until the dance brought them together once more. “By including yourself in your reply, may I assume that you too feel the need to make a better impression upon the people of Meryton?”

“Yes, Mr. Darcy, you assume correctly, but as we are speaking in a rather direct manner, you may as well say Longbourn in place of Meryton. I have done much to discourage a connection there, as you know, and need to make amends.”

He looked serious. After a moment of reflection, or perhaps he was carefully choosing his words he replied, “If you mean to make amends with Miss Bennet, I believe you will readily succeed, as she is kindness itself...but if you mean to make amends with Miss Elizabeth, I believe the shortest road to securing her approval is by *genuinely* engaging her sister, Miss Jane Bennet. I have observed that Miss Elizabeth is most protective of her family, and she and her eldest sister are as thick as two thieves,” he smiled at her, “much like Mrs. Hurst and yourself.”

Each left the other to his own thoughts, and as they stood waiting for the line to complete its pattern, Caroline observed Jane Bennet in her peripheral vision. Jane looked remarkably happy. She glowed, standing gracefully, eyes fully on Charles Bingley, as they exchanged comments about the room, the number of couples, and the general gaiety in the air.

Sh shifted her gaze to her brother, who stood beside Mr. Darcy. He was, as she expected to find, grinning like a chuckle-headed noddy at Miss Bennet. His boyish enthusiasm proved irresistible, and she found that the longer she looked at Charles, the larger her own smile grew. As Caroline’s expression shone with real affection, so too did Mr. Darcy’s mouth curve into an easy smile as he looked upon Miss Bingley watching her brother.

Mr. Darcy was surprised to see such a warm look from Miss Bingley directed at her brother Charles. *Perhaps there is hope for the lady yet*, thought he, *her countenance speaks of a genuine love for her brother that is most pleasing and so seldom seen from her*. That happy thought softened his discomfort at being in a ballroom, as he thought of his own dear sister. Such thoughts of cherished family led him to reflect upon another recent display of love of family. A

bewitching picture of Miss Elizabeth Bennet formed in his mind... cheeks brightened from her exercise, hair beautiful ruffled and tumbling from its pins, and those eyes so full of life and laughter.

“Thine eyes I love, and they, as pitying me, Knowing thy heart torment me with disdain...” He brought himself from his musings with a shake of his head. *Were but Elizabeth my own Dark Lady... egad man! Such thoughts! Wait, did I say that aloud? This is no place to reveal such thoughts, or even to entertain such thoughts.*

Darcy reddened as he reined in his imagination.

* * *

...oooOooo...

* * *

All this was noted by those guests who lined the edges of the room, merrily engaged in conversation, and always watching the action on the floor, eagerly anticipating a revealing morsel of behaviour to share with their neighbors either over a cup of punch that evening or a cup of tea the following afternoon.

Gentle sighs were released with remarks about Mr. Bingley and Miss Bennet, “Such an attractive couple...” and “How perfectly suited they are...” to Mrs. Bennet’s oft repeated, “We expect an offer any day now...”

As the dance continued, however, the conversation shifted to tittering over Mr. Darcy’s smiles for Miss Bingley. “Did you see how he admires her...” and “I have never seen such a tender look upon his face...” He has smiled more as of late of course — such an amiable gentleman — but tonight his look has a greater warmth of

spirit..." and most assuming of all, "...they are by far the most handsome couple in the room!"

Elizabeth Bennet stood farther down the line, across from her cousin, Mr. Collins. Both were pink-cheeked, though for entirely different reasons. The clergyman stood pink-faced with a sheen of perspiration on his brow after executing their first pass in the dance, and was blessedly silent as he regained his breath. Elizabeth studiously ignored him as she sought to regain her own equilibrium. Oh the mortification! How Mr. Collins managed to lose his footing as they made their way down the row of waiting couples on the dance floor was beyond reason. Her throbbing toes also spoke volumes of the man's insufficiency as a dance partner. Who could not navigate a simple reel?

To avoid Mr. Collin's attempt to catch her eye, she looked towards the top of the row of gentlemen aligned across from her, and was cheered by the unwavering attention Mr. Bingley paid to her sister. Elizabeth leaned forward to catch a glimpse of her sister, and was relieved to see Jane looking more animated and pointedly interested than was her want.

Charlotte Lucas had urged Jane to be more open in her admiration for Mr. Bingley. Her shy sister was greatly discomposed by the conversation and tried to deny the mutual regard, but her blushes gave her away, and after much gentle teasing, admitted to "liking Mr. Bingley a great deal."

Charlotte, ever-practical, suggested that perhaps Jane should find the means to better communicate this liking to Mr. Bingley, as a gentleman needs some encouragement to continue his suit. It seemed that the modest Miss Jane Bennet had taken her friend's words to heart. Elizabeth was thrilled to see the couple so taken with one-another.

Her gaze drifted over to Mr. Darcy who stood in line beside Mr. Bingley. She had appreciated the fine figure he cut when she first saw him in the receiving line - his superior height and broad shoulders were undeniably fine - but in that moment his eyes seemed softer somehow. It was as if his normally serious air had given over to the undeniable excitement in the room, and to Elizabeth he appeared almost transformed by the smile gracing his face. She concluded that he was by far the most handsome gentleman in the room.

Her brow furrowed slightly as she considered that he was, in

fact, the most handsome man of her acquaintance, whether smiling or not. Then her eyes opened wide. *When did my estimation of this man's character take such a turn? Is it possible that I esteem the very one who has insulted me so abominably?*

She could not help but stare at the man, but anything was better than looking across the line at her moist-lipped Cousin Collins.

Second Sets and Second Chances

Mr. Darcy relinquished her person with a bit too much enthusiasm and a bit too rapidly to be considered kindly done. Though she felt that they had come to understand one another, it still smarted somewhat to be soundly dismissed.

She was partnered with her brother for the next set and although Mr. Darcy had, as duty dictated, escorted her to her next partner before he hurried off, Charles was unsurprisingly thoroughly engaged with his previous partner. Both Jane Bennet and her brother greeted her with warmth, but after an initial exchange of pleasantries, Caroline felt the spare — the third dancer in a lively pas de deux.

She could not stray far from her partner. The musicians would surely pick up their instruments in a moment. She stepped back a bit and watched her brother and Miss Bennet. They shined with bright happiness. Caroline could not help but smile in reaction to the swirl of romance before her. Their mutual attraction was undeniable and their felicity catching.

She felt a gentle touch at her elbow.

Colonel Fitzwilliam had secured two cups of punch and smoothly placed one in her hand. He flashed her a brilliant smile as their eyes met but then looked away just as quickly as he offered, “You and Darcy were nicely matched in the dance.” He took a sip, “I have never seen him so well entertained in a room full of people. You found much to say to one another. How did you manage to make him smile so naturally?” He drained the cup and set it on the tray of a passing footman, his gaze scanning the room.

“Smile? Mr. Darcy? I confess I did not notice it over-much though I was surprised to find that he had much to say, and I believe we understand one another much better now. Your cousin is a very kind man.”

“It has always been thus. Darcy is most kind. And what is more, he is well-educated, proficient in all he undertakes, wears his

clothes exceedingly well, and they say he owns half of Derbyshire.”

The words were said in earnest admiration and bore the light-hearted tone of a ballroom, but he kept his eyes averted. Could it be that this man, this wholly appealing and infinitely charming man was jealous? Caroline matched his spirit, and took a sip of her punch before replying, “Yes, but I once heard it said that he owns the miserable half of Derbyshire, so there is that.”

The laugh that burst from Richard Fitzwilliam most definitely did not fit the civility of the occasion, but Caroline was delighted to gain such a response. She smiled widely as the people around them slowly returned to their own conversations - her brother Charles eyed her warily before turning back to Miss Bennet.

“No one said that. You made that up purely to offer me some solace at being born but a second son. To great success, I might add.”

“But I did not make it up, though I am very pleased with myself for making you laugh so. What a great, big, irresistible laugh you have, Colonel.”

“Who said such a thing of my distinguished and dignified relation?”

“You are tempting me to gossip, and I shall not be moved.”

“Come now, you cannot keep such a detail from a poor, old soldier. I must know who among our acquaintances is so immune to his overwhelming superiority.”

“If you must know, it was none other than Miss Eliza Bennet.”

“Miss Elizabeth? Are you certain? Why this is disastrous.” He looked sheepish, “But I fear I am overstepping.”

“If you are afraid of reveling your cousin’s attraction for Miss Eliza, allow me to put you at ease. His feelings are quite obvious to me, but oddly enough I think that the object of his affection has mistaken his attentions entirely. But I cannot allow you to mention her comments to anyone. It was something I overheard her say to another as I walked past her at an assembly last month. I would not have passed such remarks to you, but I thought you would find it diverting.”

“Diverting, yes, but disconcerting too. Darcy would be wretched to know she has such a low opinion of him.”

“I do not think it is entirely so low...” Caroline smirked as she studied the very couple about whom they had been speaking interacting across the room. “Look.” She nodded her head slightly

in their direction.

The Colonel looked up to see his cousin bowing somewhat stiffly over Elizabeth Bennet's hand. Beside her, Miss Lucas bore a satisfied expression and leaned in close to share words clearly meant for Miss Elizabeth alone, while that lady stood staring after Darcy, her face betraying astonishment and possibly embarrassment.

"I can certainly understand her blushes - the shame of dancing with that awkward ox Mr. Collins would have sent me to my quarters for the rest of the evening. He managed to step on my toes, and I was not even partnered with him."

Caroline laughed and met his eyes. They stood silent for a moment, enjoying one another's company. "What a clever man you are. But in this instance, I believe you have it wrong. It is not so much that she has a low opinion of him...I believe that in this case sometimes...sometimes the head takes longer to recognize what the heart already knows." She looked intently into his eyes.

"Caroline, I know you have been keenly anticipating standing up with me, your most handsome brother, this evening more than anything," Charles Bingley's cheerfulness instantly shifted the physics of the moment, but Caroline found she could not regret it - his enthusiasm was irresistible. And had she stood gazing into Colonel Fitzwilliam's eyes for a moment longer, who knows what she would have said.

Bingley took her hand and twirled her around quickly, taking her by surprise and heightening her sense of unbalance.

He then bowed over his free arm to Jane Bennet, "Until the supper set, Miss Bennet. I shall be sorrowing."

Caroline made a show of elbowing her brother, "You shall be struggling to keep up with me Charles. There will be no room for sorrow!" And with that the siblings quickly stepped away, leaving the Colonel and Jane Bennet staring after them.

The two sighed as one, eyed one another in astonishment, then both reddened slightly.

"Why Colonel Fitzwilliam. I confess I had no idea...but your secret is safe with me."

"Miss Bennet, while I appreciate your discretion, I keep no secrets. I have never been one for concealment."

"Forgive me, Colonel. I should not have mentioned it."

"There is nothing to forgive. In truth, it pleases me to discuss it with another, but in my distraction, I seem to have forgotten my

manners. Would you care to dance, Miss Bennet?"

"I would be delighted, Colonel."

* * *

After the end of the first set, Colonel Fitzwilliam escorted Jane Bennet to the refreshment table, where he made comfortable conversation with Miss Bennet and the Misses Long, all the while he scanned the room, seeking Caroline through the crowd. He bowed over Miss Bennet hand, thanking her for the dance, and then made for his cousin and Caroline.

He walked up quickly behind them, and transferred her hand from Darcy's arm to his own in mid-step. This left Darcy to free to find Elizabeth, and the Colonel with a moment alone with Caroline. Just as he hoped.

* * *

"You are quite popular this evening, Miss Bingley."

"And you say that as if you are surprised," she countered tartly. "Do you find me so irritating that you could not imagine that my dance card would be full tonight? I know that my pedigree is not sufficient to draw the attention of the second son of an Earl, but surely you would consider me worthy of the attentions of the second sons from a small market town in the middle of Hertfordshire?"

"You misunderstand me, Miss Bingley. It is not that I consider you an unworthy partner, but rather that I am concerned that all of those second sons of a small market town in Hertfordshire are going to claim every last dance before I am able to secure your hand for

myself.”

His tone was not at all like those London ballroom sons of Lords and Ladies — more concerned with their own cleverness than with anything about her. The man before her did offer studied bits of flattering fluff. She was used to flattering bits of fluff. What was she to do with the ruggedly handsome son of an Earl standing before her with all that sincerity and warm eyes. It was almost too much.

She choked down a sip of punch, which moistened her incredibly dry mouth, and somehow managed not to drop the cup. “If it is a dance you seek, Colonel, I do have the last set free...”

He collapsed a little in the center, like a featherbed when you flopped down upon it. “Well, if I must wait all evening to dance with you, then I suppose it is at least a small comfort that I shall have the last set of the night. Will you promise to make it a slower, longer dance? I would rather spend the time with you by my side or holding your hand than bouncing around in a long dance beside my taciturn cousin.”

“What you ask is no hardship to me, but will not my guests be disappointed with something as staid as a cotillion when they could finish with a reel?” Caroline batted her eyes and flashed a catlike grin.

“There is nothing wrong with a good reel, m’lady, but in this particular instance I would much rather try my luck with a good Viennese waltz.”

“A waltz? Positively scandalous, Colonel Fitzwilliam!”

“You cannot be so coy as all that, Miss Bingley. Surely you must have learned the steps at one of those fancy seminaries you attended before coming out, or in your sister’s drawing room, rug pushed aside, and just a little brandy added to your evening tea to make it that much more illicit.”

Caroline barked a laugh, “You have found me out, Colonel! Louisa did indeed show me the steps, as the waltz had not yet come to England while I was at school. But my sister taught both my brother and me. Said it would be all the rage in another year. But it was not brandy. It was ratafia.”

It was his turn to laugh. “I was sure it would have been brandy. It is what I was drinking when I was taught to waltz.”

“And where did you learn, sir, with all your time on the battlefield? Was it some Viennese widow, or a French courtesan?”

“Wellington’s secretary, actually. He is surprisingly light of

foot.”

“No! I do not believe it.”

“Oh, yes. Wellington is a stickler for insisting his men know how to comport themselves in company as well as on the battlefield.”

“Really?”

“Yes, in fact, he shaves twice daily even while on campaigns. Hates my hair. He told me if I were under his direct command, he would have cut it off himself. With a saber.”

His eyes twinkled nicely in the candlelight, and Caroline’s fingers itched to reach out and trace the curl at the end of his queue, twirling it about her finger. She reached up and pulled at the escaped fringe of her own straight hair, then tucked it behind her ear.

“I would not have you cut your hair. It suits you.”

“Miss Bingley, I have been wanting to ask you—”

“Miss Bingley, the lovely Miss Bingley, there you are.”

Percival approached with open arms, lips pulled back in an equally wide expression that made him look like a younger, thinner, and slightly off-kilter version of his father, Sir William Lucas.”

“And Colonel Fitzwilliam, good man, good man!” Mr. Lucas had swung his arms in and pumped the Colonel’s arm as if working the bellows at a smithy, “I must deny you the pleasure of this diamond of the first waters. Don’t hold it against me, no, no, for what man could resist the opportunity to dance with so much beauty before him, as our hostess presents here?”

Caroline felt the flush of mortification creep into her cheeks and rushed in to prevent another word, “Mr. Lucas, I thank you for your kind words. Let us leave the good Colonel and find our place at the top of the set.”

Percy Lucas took her arm and practically dragged her away, barely giving her time to hand off her punch cup to the Colonel. He watched as Miss Bingley not so subtly shrugged off Mr. Lucas’s attempt to pull her closer, then remove her arm from his altogether as she waved an exaggerated greeting to her brother who stood waiting for the start of the dance with Miss Kitty Bennet. “Give him hell, Caroline Bingley.”

Colonel Fitzwilliam downed the rest of the punch in the delicate little cup, and turned away, torn between wanting to watch every moment of Miss Bingley dancing and wanting to be the best sort of guest. The latter won out, and he found his feet directed him to

Miss Mary Bennet who was skulking as close to the wall as a painting, turned away from the activity all around her, eyes trained firmly on a sconce.

“Miss Mary, if it pleases you, would you like to join me for this set of dances?”

The girl nearly jumped out of her too big gown, almost upsetting the taper she was inspecting. She turned towards him, fingertips covered in wax, mouth agape.

He held out his arm and winked, she slowly wound her own arm through his, and he watched out of the corner of his eye as she attempted to flick the wax from her betraying digits. “As a lad my mother would box my ears for jostling the dining table just to watch the molten wax run down the side of the holder and puddle on the smooth wood.”

Mary stared up through her spectacles, through narrowed eyes, the sharp bones of her rigid shoulders casting deep pockets of shadow above the plain, high neckline of her gown. Her free hand raised very slightly to touch her fingers, and she popped the now solid covering from the pad of her index finger.

Shoulders lowered, Mary tilted her face up and gave him a surprisingly warm, if fleeting look. Her cheeks flushed becomingly. “My own mamma threatens to burn my sheet music. I believe I would very much enjoy time spent dancing with you, Colonel Fitzwilliam.”

Part IV

Uncompromising Endings

Dances with Dastards

Caroline stood beside an open balcony door cooling down from an energetic reel. A reel. She, Caroline Bingley, had danced a reel... and enjoyed it immensely. Perhaps it was the simple exertion, perhaps it was satisfaction in selecting a dance that brilliantly limited touches from the overly-familiar Mr. Percy Lucas to fingertips only. Perhaps it was that she had allowed herself to take pleasure in the moment without concern about what anyone in the room was thinking.

She shook her head. These were thoughts better left to Miss Mary Bennet, who appeared to enjoy such considerations more than dancing. She snorted at herself as her eyes alighted on that very female, who was currently dancing with none other than the dashing Colonel Fitzwilliam. Miss Mary looked almost pretty as she smiled up at Colonel Fitzwilliam as he, no doubt, regaled her with some charming tale or other.

She huffed to herself, "Mary Bennet dancing with Colonel Fitzwilliam of the Matlock Fitzwilliams and The King's German Legion while I, Caroline Bingley sit out the set. It is almost criminal."

"My lady."

A spasm coursed down Caroline's spine as hot breath stirred the loose strands of hair about her neck and tickled her ear. It made her skin crawl, like she had walked through densely spun spider webs that clung to her neck and arm as she felt a man's ungloved hand trail across her shoulder. She rolled her shoulder and whipped her head away from the intrusive touch, but the sudden movement somehow found her leaning towards instead of away from her unwelcome companion.

He moved closer still and grasped her upper arm firmly pulling her against his chest. He inserted his booted foot in between her thin slippers, a long leg pressing in between her own where it decidedly did not belong, throwing her further off balance and fully into his grasp.

Her throat tightened and she swallowed hard, frozen in place

with her body pressed firmly up against his. Her eyes swept over the room, a desire for assistance warring with hope that the scene had remained unobserved. The closest person was the unfortunately spotted Mary King. Another Mary. The diminutive woman faced her directly but was too engrossed in conversation to notice her predicament. The flow of the dance had her step away now and her partner moved into view. Was that really Mr. Darcy? Smiling and encouraging the local heiress? "Impossible!"

Again the warm breath in her ear calling her back to her own circumstance, "Are you quite well, Miss Bingley? It is indeed criminal that one such as yourself would sit out a set, but perhaps it is for the best. You seem...overwrought."

He then spun her quickly around to face him, moving her bodily, intentionally tangling their feet and keeping her in an awkward half-embrace.

But she had recovered her composure if not her footing. Caroline's eyes blazed. "Kindly unhand me, sir."

"Lieutenant, Miss Bingley, Lieutenant Wickham...here to aid a fragile females," he leaned over the arms he still held, uncomfortably close. "Do you feel sufficiently recovered to stand on your own? I was concerned when I felt you swoon against me..."

"I did not swoon!"

"It looked very like a swoon, Miss Bingley. Perhaps you would like to take a turn in the fresh air? We could easily step out on the balcony for a walk under the stars." He smiled with all his teeth.

"Your hand, *Lieutenant* Wickham." Caroline repeated.

Wickham's eyes rounded ever so slightly, "If you are really certain you are well..." he ran his fingers down the length of her arm as he finally released her, holding her hand until she pulled her fingers from his grasp. "May I fetch you a cup of punch to fortify you before your next partner claims your hand?"

"I do not need a cup of punch, I do not need fresh air, I did not swoon!" The nearby clutch of Mrs. Long, Golding, and Phillips turned their heads as one and looked keenly at Wickham and Caroline. She lowered her voice, "I assure you, I am quite well, Lieutenant Wickham," she flashed him a forced smile, "I was merely startled by your *extraordinary* nearness."

He in turn flashed a dimpled smile, and nodded, "I have been told that I have that effect on ladies. I should have exercised more caution in my approach."

She snorted, "I am to understand that you have been told that you regularly frighten ladies. That is rich." Caroline laughed low at her own wit.

"You tease me, Miss Bingley! How charming you are," Wickham showed the dimples once more and tilted his head still closer, "You are radiant when you smile, you know. So refined, so elegant...and that dress accentuates your figure remarkably...forgive me, that was too forward. I cannot help but compliment your person when you are looking so very well proportioned, so rich...ly dressed." His gaze slowly traveled the length of her body, and when he reached her eyes, he gave her his most earnest look yet.

"Have the younger girls finally dismissed your attentions as inappropriate? I cannot but account for your continued presence by my side when the room is full of such temptation."

Wickham hands flew to his heart, "You wound me gravely, Miss Bingley. Why would I pursue silly girls with so much woman before me?"

She rolled her eyes.

"If I must account for my presence, then I shall speak candidly. You are the most beguiling creature in the room. You outshine them all, and I wish to bask in your glow in hopes that some of that shine might rub off on me."

She narrowed her eyes at him then chuckled slightly, "That sounded almost unaffected."

"It is nothing but the purest truth. Will you dance the next with me then, Miss Bingley?"

She frowned, "My next is claimed."

"Then the next?"

"Also claimed, Lieutenant."

"Then the second half of this set?"

She exhaled loudly, "If you insist."

"I do insist," he took her hand and brought it to his lips before she could object.

"You know, I thought Miss Eliza Bennet was your great favorite, Mr. Wickham." It was out of her mouth before she could stop it, before she even realized it, and why? What did she care if Wickham was smitten with Elizabeth. Everyone was smitten with Elizabeth. Of course, it made it even more disgusting that he cooed sweet sentiments to her. He was so repulsive.

"I might be a favorite of hers, but that does not necessarily make

her my favorite. You take a great interest in Miss Elizabeth, though, do you not? I see you watching whenever she and Darcy stand together.”

“I do not.”

“Oh, but you do.”

“Why on earth would I care about Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth Bennet standing beside one another. She is practically engaged, you know.”

“Oh, happy day. I was not aware. Am I to understand that my old friend finally got to the point with a lady? I shall wish them joy.”

“No, Mr. Wickham, you misunderstand. Mr. Darcy is not engaged to Miss Elizabeth.”

“Then who is?”

“Well, I did see her Cousin Collins down on one knee, holding her hand to his heart, speaking all sorts of poetic language.” There. What had she said that was not true?

“The good Reverend Collins and Miss Elizabeth?”

“The very same.”

“Well he is certainly marrying up — what a lucky soul he is.”

“As you say, Mr. Wickham, but I am neglecting my *invited* guests, so you may collect me at the break. I will be speaking with those...those matrons there,” Caroline snatched her hand away and flung it in direction of the three matrons who were still stealing glances in hopes of catching a juicy morsel. They looked pleased as though they had just been served the whole cow.

“Your servant, Miss Bingley.” He bowed the deepest and most courtly of bows.

She, in turn, spun on her heel and joined the trio of ladies now appraising her openly, “Mrs. Goulding, how lovely you are for attending our ball though you are just yourself back from London! You must have visited a very fine modiste while in town. Why the cut of your sleeve is exactly as I saw in the latest Ackermann’s...” Caroline offered up quick compliments to all, and quickly led the conversation, using all her bottled up charm in an effort to forestall any injurious talk of the over-eager Lieutenant.

“Yes dear, but what was that we heard you discussing with Mr. Wickham? Are we to be hearing wedding bells in the near future? Shall we wish Miss Elizabeth and Mr. Collins joy?”

“Oh. Oh, you heard, did you? Well, it is as I said to Mr.

Wickham, Mr. Collins did get down on bended knee before Miss Elizabeth, but I am afraid I could not hear the full content of his speech. He held her hand to his heart, and it all looked rather as one expects...”

The ladies tittered and made guesses about dates and the joy of seeing young people come together.

It was wrong.

Caroline knew how very wrong it way, but it was all in good fun, was it not? What a good joke it would be to watch Miss Eliza hear of her impending marriage to her cousin. Now her night was truly complete...

But if that was so, why did she feel suddenly, wretchedly wrong?

An Earnest Officer

Despite her best efforts to control the substance of their conversation, the cackling hens would steer the talk around to the *handsome Mr. Wickham*. He was declared by all to be handsome and the most charming.

They sniffed around for bits and pieces they could pass along on their next day calls, commenting that the lieutenant seemed most attentive to his hostess. And though Caroline attempted to persuade them that the man was not to her liking, that he, in fact, was not to be considered a gentleman at all, they would give her knowing looks when he returned not ten minute later to claim her hand for the second half of the set.

The flatterer made a great show of apologizing to the trio for depriving them of the brightest belle at the ball and bowed his courtly bow to the pleased titters of the hens. She attempted to move around him, but he was faster and claimed her hand, bestowing the most reverential kiss upon her fingers before leading her to the dance floor.

She looked back and caught the eye of Mrs. Phillips who cocked an eyebrow and smiled at her as though they shared an enormous secret.

What was it with these women and their willful insensibility to see what was obvious? He was nothing more than a grasping hack with insatiable appetites for games, girls, and gold.

She spent their dance ignoring both his suggestive gaze and empty praise. Never had she been happier to see a red coat than when Captain Carter approached to claim her hand for the next set.

She looked up and realized the young man had asked her a question, or at least expected a response. "Forgive me Captain Carter. I am afraid I let my attentions wander. What was it that you had asked me?" Caroline blinked at him and turned the corners of her mouth up in what she hoped looked encouraging yet not too encouraging.

"It is nothing Miss Bingley," he ducked his head slightly, "I only wanted to thank you for inviting the officers to your ball. It was

most kind of you to include us.”

“Oh. Well, of course you are very welcome, Captain. I thank you for your attendance.”

They were silent as they went through the next figures and then came together again.

“Miss Bingley, do you think, that is to say, well...do you find Mr. Wickham’s company pleasing?”

Caroline stopped mid-stride. The Captain caught himself and barely breaking stride, lifted her to complete the turn. She coughed and turned her face away from him to disguise her upset and muttered, “Why do these people insist on speaking to me of that miscreant,” and then answered, “I afraid that is a question better left unanswered, Captain Carter, as my answer would do credit to no one. May I now ask you why my opinion of Mr. Wickham is of interest?”

Twin spots of red broke on the captain’s cheeks, “Please excuse me, Miss Bingley. I mean no offense, really, it is only that...you see...I just wanted to know...that is...”

Caroline’s impatience flared, “Do come to the point, Captain.”

“I believe I love Lydia Bennet, ma’am!”

It was Caroline’s turn to advance her partner to the next step. She looked at him sharply as she pulled him forward. His eyes were screwed shut and the captain’s athletic frame seemed to squeeze in upon itself, as if he could disappear inside his uniform if he tried hard enough. She smiled to herself and took pity on the young man.

“There there, captain,” she patted his tense arm beneath her hand, “nothing to be ashamed of, I am sure,” she quietly assured.

He opened his eyes and and looked as if he would prefer to be anywhere but in the present circumstance, avoiding Caroline’s amused gaze.

“So you favor Miss Lydia, but you ask me about the lieutenant... my guess is that you do not really care to know *my* opinion of Mr. Wickham as much as you hope to learn of Miss Lydia’s feelings about that gentleman...do I have that right?”

He nodded emphatically, eyes firmly on the ceiling and his cheeks pinker still.

“Well...I cannot tell you with complete certainty if Miss Lydia holds a serious inclination for any specific gentleman. I fear I can only tell you what you must already know...she favors a man in a red coat and likes pretty things.”

He lowered his head and hunched his shoulders.

“But recently, Lydia has discussed the importance of respectability and future prospects, Captain,” Caroline quickly interjected. “It does not follow that Miss Lydia values charm more than steadiness of character. And if I may say so, you are just as easy to look upon as Mr. Wickham.

The captain sighed and shifted to away from her as he followed the turn, and when he came back, Caroline squeezed his arm rather tightly. “Perhaps the thing to do is to make your feelings known. Woo her, Captain Carter. Tell her what it is you find so irresistible about her person,” she smiled. “I dare say all ladies appreciate that sort of attention.”

Captain Carter met her eyes with a soft smile of his own. “You really think so, Miss Bingley?”

“I do, captain, I most certainly do.”

The dance came to a close, and he escorted Caroline to the punch table where she was joined by an animated Miss Maria Lucas and Mr. Chamberlayne who both congratulated her on hosting such a lovely evening. The pair of them spoke enough for her own quiet reflection to go unnoticed as long as she continued to smile and nod. *Good Lord! What further distractions will this night present?* Caroline thought as took a long sip of punch.

Passing Notes

Caroline left the effusively thankful Miss Maria to Mr. Chamberlayne and Captain Carter and sought the comfort of her sister who she spied across the dance floor. Perhaps Louisa would sit with her for a moment and sort through the intrigues she had been presented.

“Who would have thought such unvarying society would produce such an abundance of sentiment,” Caroline murmured to herself as she wended through the crowd. For the first time in all her days Caroline wished for obscurity. She wanted nothing more than to escape the riot of the ballroom for a moment of unguarded conversation with her sister and a breath of fresh air.

Her progress was impeded once more by a glowing young Miss...Miss...freckles...what was her name? Miss Prince, no King, that was it, Miss King, who excitedly expressed her appreciation for the spendor. And the feathers on her gown. And the chalk on the floor (someone did notice!) And the punch. And the musicians. And the- here Caroline was obliged to grasp Miss King's hands in a firm embrace, as she heartily thanked her for her kind compliments. Caroline beamed her largest smile at Miss King and squeezed her hand, “Excuse me, my dear Miss King, I simply must assist my sister with...with something very important. Enjoy the dance!”

Caroline grinned like an idiot and nodded while repeating, “Thank you so very much,” as she tried to keep Louisa in sight. She found that a light touching of hands made it easier to move on, and made a point to immediately grasp the fingers of the next person to speak with her, until she found herself accidentally taking the hand of Mr. Denny.

She blushed and tried to drop his hand, but found he had latched onto hers with some determination.

“Miss Bingley, you looking very well this evening. Such a great crush you have here at Netherfield. I cannot thank you enough for including us poor officers in your invitation, most kind of you, ma'am.”

“Charles and I are so very grateful that so many of you saw fit to

attend," she replied as she attempted to retrieve her hand from his, "The room is so much more colorful with the presence of so many uniformed men."

Mr. Denny narrowed his eyes as if trying to solve a puzzle, then gave up and smiled, "From one of the more colorful of us officers, Miss Bingley." He bowed over her hand and she felt him slip a piece of paper into her palm.

He disappeared into the circle of people around the dance floor, and was off before she could object to such an improper act. She hastily tucked the paper between the fingers of her left hand and pressed past her guests without so much as a word of greeting. Caroline would submit to dances with undesirable men, she would humor the shining misses, and listen to the stories of the matrons, but she would not be caught accepting notes from the likes of Mr. Denny or any of his colorful companions.

She ducked out of the ballroom and with quick steps found her way to the ladies retiring room. At least here she could find the privacy to see who dared pass her correspondence, though she would prefer her room for such clandestine activity.

Caroline moved behind an artfully arranged curtain and stood beside with a basin, tried to ignore the chamber pot, and unfolded the note. The hand was decidedly masculine, the letters even, well-formed and bold.

To the enchanting Miss Bingley,

Forgive me for importuning you with such an impropriety, but I cannot help myself.

Circumstance forces me to leave Meryton on the morrow, and I find that if I do not first tell you the contents my heart, I will go mad with passions left unsaid. If you do not agree to sit out the next set and meet me in the library, I will forever suffer a misery of the acutest kind.

For you have my heart, you are my light, and

I am that merry wanderer of the night.

"Merry wanderer of the night..."

"My lady, do you require assistance?" A maid asked through the curtain.

"No!" Caroline started, "no, I thank you. I shall be just a moment." There was no signature, but there was no mistaking the quote. A Midsummer Night's Dream. His horse, Robin Goodfellow. Leaving tomorrow. Merry Wanderer of the Night indeed. It had to be none other than Colonel Fitzwilliam!

She reread the note. It was a bit much, but no matter. "I will meet him!"

"What is it, Ma'am? May I bring you something?"

"No! Yes, just a glass of water, please." She carefully folded the page into a small square and tucked it deep into her stays, blushing at her own boldness. Caroline removed her gloves, poured cold water into the basin, and carefully patted her warm cheeks with damp hands. She ran her fingertips over her brows, smoothed her hair, and ran her hands down her bodice feeling the outline of the paper against her skin.

He *wants* me. He wants *me*.

Caroline pulled back the curtain and smiled at the maid who stood with a glass of water in her hand. She took it and drained it in one long drink. "Thank you, Molly. I am feeling much better." She paused outside the door and looked down the dim hallway where bright light and music spilled from the ballroom. Bows moved rapidly over strings as the musicians played a lively reel, laughter and clapping carried down to where she stood.

Caroline turned away and stepped quickly passed a footman who waited to be needed by someone. "Please let him think I head to the card room," she whispered to herself. She moved quickly down the dim hall. The air grew thick with the smell of cigars. Another footman stood at the door to the card room. She froze as he moved to open the door for her.

"No, wait! Please, do not open that door."

"Ma'am?"

"I came to see if you could be so kind as to find a way to... perhaps...to open a window, in there and in the next room. The smell of that smoke is ghastly. It gives me a headache, and I cannot bear the thought that the curtains will retain that cigar odor."

The footman offered a short bow, "Yes, ma'm, as you say." As he opened the door and walked into the room, Caroline spied her brother Bernard playing at cards. She hopped back into the shadows and continued down the now empty hall, hoping he had been too absorbed in his hand to notice her in the doorway.

Compromise!

The library was empty. And cold. Were it not for the moonlight shining in through the tall windows, the room would be dark.

She moved towards the window and immediately bumped into a small table, dislodging a heavy book from its resting place. It landed with a thud on her foot. She hissed and rubbed her toes through her thin dancing slippers, "Blasted, stupid Plato! What am I doing in an empty library anyway? A very cold, empty library. In the middle my own ball."

She picked up the book and tossed it loudly on the table, and hopped on one foot to the settee closest to the french doors leading to the rear balcony. She flopped down, removed her slipper, and continued the ministrations to her injured toes. She then took off her other slipper and curled her toes into the plush carpet and sighed contentedly, as she leaned back into the cushions.

"I have never been fond of the Greeks myself. I always fancied the Romans had more fun."

Caroline's heart slammed against the wall of her chest, louder than volume two of the Republic hitting the table. Every muscle tight, she bounced up and out of the small sofa and scrambled behind it, putting it between her and the shadows.

Her breath came in a gasp and she brought both hands to her chest, pressing against her heart, "You startled me! Show yourself!" she called out.

The responding laugh that reached out of the dark lacked any warmth or humor. The voice was decidedly not that of Richard Fitzwilliam. That awful laugh did nothing to slow her breathing but it did stir her anger. "You like to frighten lone women? Like to cause alarm? I will give you reason to be alarmed. I will have you thrown out of this house in an instant with no concern for your dignity, and to my immense satisfaction."

"Come now, sweet Caroline. Is that any way to speak to your very own Romeo?"

The voice was less threatening, pitched in a ridiculous almost-whisper, the attempt at intimacy so insincere and affected that it

made her almost laugh - pathetic. The absurdity of it all shored up her confidence and eased her racing heart.

"Well, Romeo, I suggest you go in search of your Juliet. I am most certainly not her. And you have no right to use my name. You had best leave."

There was no response.

"If you leave now, no one will be the wiser. Go." She pointed to the door to emphasize her command. "Go!"

She heard softly padded footsteps moving closer and straightened her spine.

"Now where is the fun in that?" The man stepped out of the shadows and into the frosty blue moonlight. "I have been waiting for you."

"Wickham," Caroline's face went rigid, eyes flattened, her distaste evident. Just as quickly, her expression shifted to one of confusion. "What do you mean, waiting for me? That is ridiculous. I am not here to meet you, certainly not you," she snorted, completely dismissing the man before her, "No. Never you."

He threw his head back and laughed, "Ah, Caroline. So delightful, so entertaining. We shall make such a fashionable and modern couple." He moved directly in front of her, his legs almost touching the seat cushion.

"Stop calling me Caroline. It is completely untoward, and sounds disgusting coming from your mouth. I am to meet Colonel Fitzwilliam, if you must know. And...Charles. Neither of whom will be happy to see you here, deviling me so. You must take your leave."

"Tut-tut. I hardly think you invited that happy-go-lucky brother of yours to a tryst. It is really not the thing," he reached out and caressed her hand, which she pulled back immediately and crossed her arms, hugging herself and hiding her hands.

"Colonel Fitzwilliam, though, who would have guessed? That really is a surprise! I thought your cap tilted decidedly in the direction of our dear Darcy...well, that would been a slightly sweeter win for me, but I am almost equally happy to dash the hopes of our gallant Colonel and second son."

"Of what do you speak, Lieutenant?" Caroline said with more pique than inquiry.

"Is it not obvious? Come, Caroline, I thought you more clever than that. But I won't be disappointed in you, not now, not today,"

he sighed dramatically, "if I must spell it out for you, I will."

He pushed the settee aside so fast that it made Caroline flinch and bunched the carpet against her bare feet. She took a full step back and found herself against the edge where the door met the wall. She reached out and tried the handle to the balcony, but found it locked. As it should be.

He smiled and continued as if indulging a child, "You and I are more alike than not, Caroline Bingley. Each of us reaching for the stars, working so hard to escape our beginnings." He reached out to stroke her cheek, but she whipped her head to the side to avoid his touch.

He persevered, "Each of us quite attractive, quite able to charm when necessary...cultivated...polished..." he edged closer with each word, "dare I say calculating?" He wrenched her hand from her side and kissed it then sighed, "I had really hoped for a more pedigreed lady from a landed family, but your twenty-thousand plus pounds is attractive enough."

"You are mad if you think I will agree to marry you," she snatched her hand back, and hit the wall with her elbow, making her wince and breath in sharply, "You are a snake in the garden."

He laughed, "you are making this so much harder than it need be, my dear Caroline."

"This?" She swung her arm round the room wildly, making Wickham lean back. "This is a library with books and comfortable chairs, nothing more. This is you leaving my presence now. Before I scream." Her face was a mask of frustration.

"I hear you, I understand your unhappiness, your disappointment...such an ambitious woman you are, but you must admit..." he gave her a half smile, "you scream...a footman finds us in a dark room...our fates forever twined as good as a kiss..." he leaned in expectantly.

The slap was forceful enough to turn his head, and resonated loudly in the silent room. He slowly turned back to face her, rubbing his jaw. "I will kiss you soon enough, how and when I want. I'm a betting man, and I bet...if I were to search you, most thoroughly, I would find my note still on your person."

Her eyes widened, and he laughed.

"Thank you for confirming my suspicions. That makes *this* easier," he leaned closer, whispering into her ear, "I will allow you to choose how *this* unfolds. You see, my lovely Caroline, at the end

of *this* set my friend Denny is to approach your affable brother Charles...or should I say our affable brother Charles? Yes, I like that."

Our brother Charles will rush to the library with Denny as he will have heard that you were seen leaving the dance floor in my company, leaning heavily on my arm, your foot painfully injured while dancing. You shall be sitting on a chair, your delicate foot in my hand and tears in your eyes, as I express my most ardent sentiments to you on bended knee..."

She interrupted him with a snort, and leaned as far back as possible. "That is preposterous! As if anyone would ever believe that I, Caroline Bingley, have encouraged a lowly Lieutenant of the -shire Militia to court me-"

He cut her off, "That is the easy way," he spat at her, "but I am more than happy to show them another scene entirely." Wickham seized her upper arms, pushed her against the sharp corner of the woodwork, and pasted a harsh kiss on her lips, "*This* is the hard way."

He kissed her again, his hands roaming up and down her body, fingers digging into her ribs, her hips. The more she struggled to free herself, the harder he pressed against her body against the wall, pushing the breath out of her lungs as his lips moved down her neck.

You will not cry, you will not let him see you cry, Caroline repeated the words to herself.

He nipped at her like an animal. She felt her eyes fill with tears. Then suddenly his weight was gone and she could breathe.

He laughed at her, then leaned back and grabbed her chin, forcing her to look him in the eye, "No one need for anyone to *believe* anything, sweetheart, when they see you beneath me.

He turned her towards the settee and pushed her down as he fell on top of her. He forced his tongue between her lips, against her teeth, slimy and insistent.

So she bit down as hard as she could.

He pushed off of her, leaned over, and grabbed his mouth, issuing a muffled "Ballocks!"

"You bit through my tongue," an incredulous Wickham garbled as blood-tinged saliva pooled in his hand. "God's wounds, woman!"

Caroline scrambled away from him as he leaned over the side of the small lounge, thick dark liquid trickling from his lips onto the

carpet. She padded backwards, her hand sweeping the air behind her, lest she draw attention to herself by bumping into furniture.

She froze as her behind hit a table edge, rocking it backwards, and Wickham whipped around to face her. Still leaning forward, expression murderous, he sprang towards her and “You!”

Caroline’s hands scrambled to right the table, as her skirt tangled in the table legs. The book she had so carelessly tossed there moments before slid into her hands. She took the thick volume in both hands and swung it in Wickham’s direction as she toppled backwards over the table.

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“La Carter! You must keep up,” Lydia bounced down the hall, “I swear I saw her go this way.”

“Miss Lydia, are you, are you certain she was not in the card room? Why would Miss Bingley be in the library in the middle of her own ball?”

Lydia turned around and rolled her eyes. “Why would anyone be in a dark, quiet room during a ball, dear Carter? Must I spell it out? As-sig-nation!”

He blushed, “Well, I would not be the one to say such a thing, Miss Lydia, especially not of my hostess. But now that you mention it, we had better get one of your sisters ourselves. It would not be proper us to run off down a deserted hall and into an empty room together, even if...” he trailed off as Lydia gave him a look that

would wither a stone.

“Captain Carter, there is a footman not twenty feet from us so we are hardly alone, and if I am right, at least one of the rooms won’t be empty. Besides,” she tugged on his hand, “there is not time to find Kitty or,” she shuddered, “Mary, who never approves of me anyway. Come on!”

Captain Carter sighed and took a candelabra from a hall table, and nodded his apology to the footman down the hall, stationed outside the card room door, who in turn pretended not to notice anything at all.

The pair discovered nothing in the billiard room, and nothing in a closet but empty shelves. When they reached the door to the library, Captain Carter motioned for Lydia to stop. “Did you hear that? I could swear I just heard a man say, ‘Ballocks!’ or something like that,” he reddened immediately. The two leaned their ears against the door as one, just in time to hear someone shout out something unintelligible about wounds.

Captain Carter reached in front of Lydia and protectively moved her behind him and threw the door open wide. Light spilled into the room, and Lydia and Captain Carter stepped through just as Caroline smashed a book into Wickham’s face and fell back, feathered skirt tangled in a small table.

Everyone froze in place and then Lydia ran to Caroline and carefully took her hand, “My dear friend, are you well? Tell me you are well.”

Caroline lifted her head and Captain Carter stepped carefully around to her other side and crouched down, “Tell us how we may aid you, Miss Bingley.”

Her body suffused with heat, and she started to laugh and cry all at once, overwhelmed by their heartfelt inquiries and the events of the evening. Captain Carter looked from Lydia to Caroline, not knowing where to focus, and stumbled over himself, “Are you...can we move...is your person...is anything broken?”

He looked so earnest that Caroline found her eyes welling up again, and she bit her lip to keep silent, fearing that any words would come out in a emotion-laden croak. She turned her head to Lydia, who reached out and swept a strand of hair out of Caroline’s eyes, tucking it neatly behind her ear. Caroline sniffled and through pressed lips said, “My skirt...can’t move my legs...to get up...”

Lydia scooted down to Caroline’s knees and turned back to face

her friend, "It is nothing," she quickly untwisted a layer of feathered skirting from one of the long table legs and smiled at her friend, "you are simply caught up in this ugly stool. Give me one moment..."

Lydia proceeded to separate feathers and netting from the table, freeing Caroline who sat up, pointing a finger to the darkened recess, uttered in a near-whisper, "There..."

Lydia and Captain Carter peered into the dark, and he stood, taking the candles with him. He stumbled over Wickham's leg, and crouched beside the Lieutenant's inert form.

Captain Carter looked to Lydia, "Would you be so kind, Miss Lydia as to hold this for me?" he said, lifting the candelabra slightly.

Caroline stood with Lydia's assistance, and the two stepped closer to Captain Carter, Lydia taking the hold of the only source of light in the room, and standing a little closer to the Captain than necessary.

That man lifted Wickham's hand and, after a moment, let it fall limply back against the floor, "He lives." The ladies sighed in relief. The Captain continued to examine Wickham for any broken limbs, and satisfied that he was intact, gently turned his head to face them.

"Lord, but he looks a mess!" burst out of Lydia who leaned in closer to examine the prone Wickham. "He looks so...so wrong."

All three leaned closer, The glow of the candles in the dark room illuminated his face - dark hair tousled over his forehead, remarkably long dark lashes outlined against pale skin, and copious amounts of deep red blood dripping from his nose, down his lips... staining his perfectly tied, perfectly white cravat.

Captain Carter turned to Caroline, deep shadows exaggerating his frown, "What happened here? What did you do to him?"

A State of Disarray

Lydia ran into the ballroom and darted between Sir William Lucas and her sister. "Lydia! Have a care and for heaven's sake, slow down!" Elizabeth grabbed for her hand and Lydia spun around with the abrupt change of direction.

"Not now Lizzy!" Lydia jerked her hand in an attempt to shed the hold, but her sister held fast.

"Excuse me Sir William, my sister requires a word with me."

Lydia rolled her eyes and huffed, but allowed Elizabeth to tug her a few steps away before firmly shaking off her hand "Lizzy, do let me go. I am on a mission," she turned her head to scan the ballroom, "It is not as though you ever really want to talk to me anyhow."

Elizabeth found herself taken aback and looked more closely at her sister, "Lyddie, first, that is not true, second, a lady does not run in a ballroom, and third...tell me what are you about." Elizabeth's eyes searched her sister's face. "You have a very determined look about you that is most concerning."

"I am serious, Elizabeth. I must go and find Colonel Fitzwilliam, and although you may have time for me now, I most definitely do not have time for you."

Elizabeth let Lydia's hand fall from her grasp, "Well then let me help you, Lydia."

"Lizzy really," Lydia pleaded, "this is not the time for you to take an interest in my affairs."

Elizabeth and Lydia stood with eyes locked, when suddenly the very man Lydia sought swept into the space between them, "Do my ears mistake me or did my name fall from the lips of one of the lovely Miss Bennets?"

Lydia's shoulders drooped in relief, "Colonel Fitzwilliam, I am so glad to see you!" She grabbed his arm, "I am to take you to Captain Carter and Miss Bingley, in the library. You must help us...settle a... a bet."

Elizabeth frowned, "Lyddie, you cannot be wagering with Miss Bingley and—"

“Really, Elizabeth,” Lydia rolled her eyes dramatically, “it is not a money wager, and Miss Bingley asked for the Colonel. You were not included. We really must go so as not to miss the next dance. After Colonel Fitzwilliam solves the...question, of course.”

“Well, I know when I am not wanted. Colonel, I do hope my sister does not keep you from your own entertainments.” She smiled at him and raised a warning eyebrow at her sister, then turned back to see if she could make amends by picking up her conversation Sir William Lucas. She would even consider bringing up his beloved St. James. Instead of returning to their conversation, she found Sir William engaged in talk with Mr. Darcy a few steps away, who stared at her keenly with brows furrowed in what she assumed was a condemnation of Lydia’s embarrassing behavior, running so wild and then absconding with his cousin.

Though disapproving of Lydia herself, she felt provoked by Mr. Darcy’s apparent judgement of her sister. Though Lydia’s behavior was certainly objectionable, she at least had the excuse of being just out of the school room. Mr. Darcy had been out of his leading strings for some years. The thought of Mr. Darcy in short pants made her grin. To her great surprise, Elizabeth found herself treated to the sight of two thoroughly charming dimples accompanied by a bright smile coming from none other than the dour man from Derbyshire. How confusing! How appealing. When he smiled, she thought, Mr. Darcy might be the most handsome man she had ever laid eyes on. The very thought stole her breath. Mr. Darcy had dimples. Mr. Darcy was smiling. At her!

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Colonel Fitzwilliam allowed himself to be half-dragged from the ballroom by Miss Lydia Bennet but came to a firm stop as soon as they had passed out of earshot of the footmen. Lydia leaned forward, tugging on his arm with all her might, and shot him a look of supreme consternation, "Colonel Fitz-"

He removed her hand from his arm, "Miss Lydia, delightful as you are, you must know that I cannot follow you into a dark room without risking your reputation. It would credit neither of us to cross that threshold."

"Pshaw, Colonel. We won't be alone at all. Captain Carter is waiting for us."

Colonel Fitzwilliam's eyes widened for a moment. "Miss Lydia! That is even worse! You must take greater care for your reputation...your very person. You cannot possibly be the architect of a situation that places you at the mercy of two men you barely know. It is a fool's-"

He lost speech as Lydia darted behind him and gave him a push. "Why are men so stupid! I am not so ignorant as that!" She emphasized the so. "It is Miss Bingley. She needs our help. Now move!" She shoved him once more towards the door, as he digested her words.

Then he jumped, "Why did you not lead with, 'She needs our help?' Where is she?" he called over his shoulder as he dragged Lydia down the hall.

He flung open the library door, neatly vaulted over a toppled table, landed in the center of the room and quickly turned about, taking in the scene. Caroline sat away from the men, head bent down, backlit by strong moonlight coming through the French doors behind her, the soft feather edges of her skirt glowed.

He rushed to her. Without thinking he bent over her, reaching for her arms. He froze when she flinched. "You are well?" he asked hoarsely.

"I...I am...I cannot look..." she answered softly, pointing limply

to the side where Captain Carter still knelt beside the prone Wickham.

Colonel Fitzwilliam knelt down and slowly took her hand in his. "You are cold." He rubbed her fingers between his hands. He stood and removed his jacket, draping it over her shoulders and gently rubbed his hands up and down her arms. He slowly sat beside her on the settee.

Caroline lifted her head, but kept her eyes on her feet. "He lured me here. I thought...I thought he was...well, he is not you...but he tried to compromise me. Wants my money. He..." she stopped and pressed her fingertips to her lips, then wiped the back of her hand across her mouth. "He laughed at me. I told him to leave. And then he grabbed me and kissed me."

The colonel reached for her hand and gave her a gentle squeeze then kept her hand between his own.

"I struggled to get away. I reached out and found a book and hit him. Captain Carter said he is alive, but I think he may die yet," She shuddered, "There is such a lot of blood."

"Miss Bingley?"

She did not respond.

"Miss Caroline Bingley," he said a bit louder to no effect. "Caroline!"

She turned to face him for the first time since he entered the room. Her eyes were glassy, and she looked as though she might begin to cry. The Colonel leaned closer. "He," he spat out the word, "is not worth a single one of your tears. And if your book did not properly finish him off, I very well may myself."

Caroline gave him a quivery smile but said nothing.

"I have known Wickham since he was a boy. I have watched him pull the whiskers off of cats. He has ever been a wretched waste of good food. Do not cry for him."

"Is he-" her voice broke as she shivered violently, "is he dead then? Did I kill him?" Caroline finished with a squeak and cringed.

The Colonel answered her as gently as possible, "Would you like me to check?"

She nodded.

"Will you be well?"

She nodded again.

"You are certain? Of both?"

"Yes," she whispered. "I would like to know."

“Very well.” The Colonel held her gaze for a moment longer, then released her hand and stood, eyes still on Caroline until he seemed satisfied that she was indeed sound.

He walked over to where Lydia and Captain Carter stood beside Wickham’s prone form. Wickham groaned and Colonel Fitzwilliam kicked him in the side. He started choking and sputtering.

“Get up you worthless turd!” The Colonel grabbed the lapels of his jacket and hauled him roughly to his feet. “Get up so I can knock you down again you cowardly worm!”

The Colonel threw a punishing fist into Wickham’s gut. He fell back on the floor. “I surrender! Leave off, Richard!” his words came out thick-tongued and garbled as he scooted away from his assailant.

Suddenly the door to the hall flew open with a bang and Mr. Denny fell into the room, laughing as a cup of punch sloshed over his hand before he could right himself, “Wickham you dog, what’s so important that you need to pull me away from a dance with a pretty girl to meet you in a libra-” He drew up short on seeing so many gathered.

“Good lord is every guest going to find his way to the library tonight?” Colonel Fitzwilliam remarked, as Lydia shouted out a relieved sounding, “Denny!”

“Oh hello,” that man offered a short bow to Lydia and the room and straightened his jacket. “I did not realize there was a party going on in the library. I’m here to meet Mr. Wickham. He asked me to...oh there you are,” Denny laughed as he registered that Wickham was indeed present, then concern washed over his countenance. “What on earth are you doing on the floor?” He knelt down near his friend and scrubbed a hand over his mouth. “What in the Dickens happened to your face?”

“Denny thank heavens you are here!” Wickham sighed dramatically and pointed a shaking hand at Caroline from his place on the floor, “She attacked me,” he jerked his head toward Colonel Fitzwilliam, “and then he kicked me!” Blood began to ooze again from Wickham’s nose over his lips as if to emphasize his point. “Lord, but it hurts! My nose!” he grabbed at the handkerchief Denny proffered to staunch the blood and winced, moaning.

“That shrew of a woman bit me! She met me here of her own free will, kissed me for a good while. Then she bit my tongue and hit me in the face-” he cried out as the Colonel kicked his leg.

“Ow!”

“Shut your mouth Wickham! Or I will cut out that tongue permanently.” He loomed over him menacingly, “Miss Bingley is a lady in every sense of the word and is your host. I guarantee kissing you was not on the master list of how to make tonight’s ball a huge success. You on the other hand are a libertine, a liar, and a gamester - the worst sort of devil. You aren’t clean enough to spit upon.”

“These are grave accusations, gentleman,” Captain Carter held up his hands and looked from Mr. Wickham to Colonel Fitzwilliam.

Colonel Fitzwilliam ignored the captain and crouched down, examined Wickham’s face closely, and nodded approvingly, “That will do nicely. Your days of charming maidens with your pretty looks are at an end at least. Your nose is as crooked as your soul. It will give much better indication of what lurks inside that previously pretty head.”

“I need the apothecary,” Wickham honked from behind the soiled handkerchief.

The Colonel kicked him in the leg again, “You are not in a position to ask for assistance, and no one here cares about your suffering. You will keep your lying mouth shut while I ponder what to do with you.”

Wickham swallowed loudly in the quiet of the room and whimpered a little. Lydia quietly mumbled, “I care, Mr. Wickham.”

“Shut up, Lyddie!” hissed Kitty.

Captain Carter looked at Lydia as a dog left out in the rain before, then defeatedly shifted to face the Colonel. “Colonel Fitzwilliam, as much as it pains me to have an officer in my regiment who engages in such disgraceful behavior, I cannot let you exact any...permanent retribution. I am here to uphold the letter of the law, and that law requires proof. As much as it would give me pleasure to see Mr. Wickham pay for his misdeeds here and now, I must ask you to respect my authority here.”

Denny blurted, “Will someone please tell me what has happened here. How did this go from kissing to bloodshed? In a library, during a fancy ball...it is too much.” He passed off his cup of punch to Lydia.

Colonel Fitzwilliam lifted his eyes from Wickham, took in Captain Carter’s earnest expression, and sighed mightily, “You ask a lot, Captain. This is not the first transgression this dung heap has

committed against a woman.”

“Nor will it be his last, is my guess, but I cannot let you kill the man.”

The room echoed with the sound of four sharp intakes of breath. “No!”

The Colonel and the Captain jolted as all the others present uttered the same word at the same time, but with decidedly different sentiments — Denny’s no was one of disbelief. Lydia wailed a pitiful crying no. Kitty’s no came as she pulled on Lydia’s arm to stop her sister from falling on the floor in a heap beside Wickham.

The final no came from Caroline, who stood up and walked over to stand beside Colonel Fitzwilliam. All eyes in the room focused on her. It was a very firm no. It brooked no dissent.

“No,” she repeated.

“Do you want me to kill him?” Colonel Fitzwilliam asked her, “I will gladly do so. For you, I would forfeit my freedom to see him at the end of my blade or in the sights of my gun on a field of honor.”

She smiled softly up at the Colonel. “No. That is not what I mean, I mean, no...he is not worth it. You cannot throw away your life for his. It would be unconscionable to let you sacrifice yourself for such a...” she looked down at Wickham, “such despicable, unworthy, waste of a man.”

The room fell silent as her words settled around them.

“Something must be done.”

All eyes turned to Kitty Bennet.

“Really something must be done. My mamma would insist upon it...if one of us were in your place, Miss Bingley.” She gestured to Lydia beside her. You are compromised most thoroughly. Even if we were to return to the ballroom now, your gown is damaged and losing feathers. Mr. Wickham is...well, Mr. Wickham looks a fright. We have all been absent for so long...and you are the hostess. I am sure it has been noted.”

“Miss Kitty is right. You must marry me, dear Caroline. Caroline Wickham...how fine that sounds.” Wickham attempted a smile, but could not move his mouth without grimacing in pain.

Lydia’s face crumpled and she whimpered, “But you said I was your favorite, that you could not resist my charm...”

“Your charms are...many and undeniable, Miss Lydia, but as much as I enjoy your fine company, a man has to eat. Miss Bingley

may be all sharpness, in both looks and disposition, but I will overlook her deficiencies and give her the opportunity to treat me with the respect and sweetness that I deserve as her betrothed." He turned his snot and blood-dampened face to Caroline, "If you apologize and start that kindness now, my dear, we can announce our engagement before we dance the last set together. I cannot think of a more appropriate time or place for sharing our good fortune with everyone."

Colonel Fitzwilliam moved as if to attack the prone man, but Caroline grabbed hold of his arm to distract him, "He is truly not worth scuffing your boots. They are still perfectly polished, but I am afraid that another kick might be the one that mars that shiny finish your batman worked so hard to achieve." She looked up at him with sad eyes and then turned to Kitty Bennet, "Miss Catherine, I am afraid you are right," her eyes dropped, "my gown is ruined, and I am sure that my hair is in the same state."

She walked a step towards Wickham. "But I will never, never marry the likes of you. I would rather be sent away in shame to the wilds of Ireland with neither family nor friends than share a life with you."

Denny blundered, "But Miss Bingley, you won't be able to stay here with such stories floating about."

She hung her head in defeat, dropped the Colonel's arm and took a step towards the door. She turned back to face the others in the room. "I thank you all, more than words can express for your assistance-" she choked up as she met Colonel Fitzwilliam's concerned eyes, "but Mr. Denny is correct. I must begin packing my trunks. I must go. Tonight."

Caroline turned and then a hand shot out and grasped her own firmly, "Wait! Please wait."

Colonel Fitzwilliam stepped forward and took her other hand in his. "You cannot go. You cannot...there are always options..."

Her brow furrowed, "But Kitty is right." She whispered just so he could hear, "he kissed me and tried to touch me. It was terrible." She teared up, "If I pack now, Blanchet and I can leave tomorrow morning as everyone sleeps off the effects of a late night. I won't have to face my brother, or Louisa, or that disgusting man..."

She trailed off as he brought her hands together between his and chuffed them gently. "Miss Bingley...Caroline...you do not need to leave, and you do not need to consider the likes of George

Wickham...marry me, Caroline. Choose me.”

A Husband for Caroline

Caroline felt her brow furrow, the tears well in her eyes and despite each and every sensibility she possessed, her lip quivered. She was going to cry, and it would be hideous.

“You...you...you would marry...me?”

Colonel Fitzwilliam slowly and purposefully nodded his head. “I have thought of nothing but you since I held you in my arms in the stable. Since that night I have felt all the weight of all the lonely nights of my life pile upon me.

“I have been a man untethered, directionless, without a battle. And then you fall into me, a veritable cannon ball of glorious energy, sweeping a path through life like the arc of my sword, all sharp words and shrewd strategy.

He stepped closer. “Except you have committed a most grievous tactical error...missed the most obvious and prudent salvo.”

She turned to fully face him, and whispered “And what error would that be, Colonel Fitzwilliam?”

“You have set your sites on the wrong target, Miss Bingley.”

“The wrong target?”

“Yes, Miss Bingley,” He cleared his throat. “It has not escaped my attention that you find my cousin attractive. Darcy is indeed an upstanding man, there is none finer. But I do not believe he is that man for you.”

“No?” she whispered.

“No.

“You are beyond demanding. Difficult. Wickedly assertive. And you are a flash fire, a fire work display, a crack of lightning. You have a sharp mind behind your sharp tongue, and you are the most exciting woman I have ever met.”

A single tear escaped Caroline’s eye. His finger gently reached up and caught it on his glove, glittering in the candlelight against the white leather. He edged closer still.

“You would be wasted on one such as Darcy. You would wither away at Pemberley. You do not belong in a country house, hidden away in the dusty wilds of Hertfordshire or Derbyshire, where the

excitement is measured by the arrival of the post and another walk among the daisies. You belong on display, in all of your sparkling, crystalline acuity. You belong on the arm of a man who knows your worth, who will step back and let you shine, and who will cherish you for exactly who you are...who loves every last bit of you, from your absurd fascination with feathers to the tip of dripping nose.”

He took out a handkerchief and held it in place. “Blow.”

And she did.

Then she stared into his eyes, the furrow between her brows growing though the tears had ceased. “But you are the son of an Earl, and I am the daughter of a dead sail maker.”

“You are a relentless tigress who will claw out the eyes of anyone who threatens her domain.”

“Are you quite through?”

“Not hardly. You are fearless and clever...beautiful and elegant. And you are the only woman I have ever loved.” He stepped so close their toes were touching. “May I?”

Caroline nodded emphatically. She found herself at once surrounded by warm, strong arms, holding her tight. Her heart beat wildly, as if it might burst from her chest but in an altogether pleasant way. He cocked his head.

“You have not answered my question.”

“You have not asked a question.”

“Good lord, you are correct. But if I were to ask a question...the question...would you have me?”

The furrow smoothed to an eyebrow raise, remarkably high. She watched as he dropped his gaze and felt his arms begin to release her. And so she did what she was meant to do, what felt more right than any direction she had ever taken.

She threw her arms around his neck, pulled his head down, and kissed him soundly on the lips. Not convinced she had done it right at all, she kept her eyes open and watched for his reaction. A smile stretched across his face as he closed his eyes — he had never looked more at ease, more serene. He reached one hand up and gently cradled her cheek, traced his fingers to the side of her neck then into her hair.

“That is how I hoped it would be with us...you...jumping in with both feet, no thinking, no strategizing...all action.” He moved his lips softly over hers, small kisses fluttering wonderfully across her lower lip, across her cheek, trailing tingles down her jaw. When

he reached the spot beside her ear, he stopped and whispered softly, "Caroline Bingley, will you have me to husband? Will you take my hand in marriage and spend all of your days inventing new ways to tempt and torment me, and me alone?"

She pulled his head lower still, kissed across his wide jaw and up to his ear, "Richard Fitzwilliam, I will have you to wed, take your hand in marriage, and promise to tempt and torment you until my last breath. I believe I have loved you all along, and I am overjoyed to answer you yes, yes I will marry you!"

They kissed once more, a soft kiss that melted her insides like chocolate in a bowl of heated cream. They leaned together, lips brushing and exchanging breathe as she stared up into his eyes.

"I am going to be sick. You broke my nose, and now you will to marry Richard!" Wickham burbled out through his slick lips, interrupting their moment with his whimpering cry, "But what about me?"

"Oh, shut up, you mewling miscreant! Captain, get the unrepentant, sorry lieutenant on his feet. I know just what to do with this pigeon-livered lecher."

Pirate Promises

Captain Carter grabbed Wickham's epaulettes and hauled him up, feet scrambling for purchase.

"You're hurting him!" Lydia wailed then cried out, "Stop pinching, Kitty!"

"Then stop acting like the most stupid girl in all of England," Kitty hissed, "now help me repair Miss Bingley's gown."

"I will do no such thing," Lydia snapped her head around and flounced over to where Captain Carter held a moaning Wickham's hands behind his back.

Kitty moved to Caroline's side, "Forgive my sister. She is as shallow-minded as she is tall. May I?"

Caroline gave Kitty a small smile and nod, as the younger girl reached towards her, and began to smooth, tuck, and re-pin her hair.

"There. Your hair is lovely once again. Truly. You know, with five sisters and one maid to attend us all, we are all very skilled in the art of styling hair. And it does not stop with hair. Why, if I have picked the stitches out of one of Jane's gowns to work it over and make it my own, I have done it twenty times." Kitty began to shift the feathers on Caroline's skirt, and gave a nervous titter as she bobbed her head to where Lydia stood, "That one is the most talented with a needle though, outside of Jane. Jane has all the patience to sew and embroider, whereas Lydia has none of the patience but all of the talent. I just make do."

Deft fingers moved quickly, twisting, straightening, before giving a final fluff to the skirt. "It will do, yes, it will do nicely in fact. Just no more reels for tonight."

"I cannot thank you enough for the kindness you have shown me, Miss Kitty." Caroline rasped and broke off as she felt the tears welling.

Kitty waived away the gratitude, "Please, call me Kitty. There is no need to thank me. It is what anyone would do."

"No, no it is not. I would not have looked after you so generously."

Kitty eyes shown under a sadly angled brow. "No?"

"Oh yes, yes I would have. But not when I first arrived in Meryton, and not if I had encountered such a scene while I was in London. I would have been awful to you. I have been awful to you, Kitty. I have been judgmental and prejudiced, and disrespectful...I am ashamed of how I have treated you."

Again Kitty waived her off, and her face took on a gentle smile once more, "Oh pshaw. You are a fine lady, of course you would look down on us here in Meryton and Longbourn. It is a dusty, awful place, with no real shopping, little to do, and we have our own share of judgmental and prejudiced people, believe me."

Caroline shook her head, "No, not like me."

"Oh, you don't believe me, you think you are so unique in your snobbery. How droll! Consult your own feelings. Have you not weathered all of the indirect cuts our small town matrons have to give in recent days? Do you not see their heads turn away when you enter the room? Surely even you cannot be so self-possessed. I would faint dead away if faced with such strong censure from any community.

"And then there is Sir William. Our closest connection to the King...who never lets it rest. And there is my mamma who talks endlessly when she should be quiet, and How silly we all must look to you. It certainly excuses any snobbishness on your part. You..." Kitty flung her hands up, "you look like a princess. Even if you are not one."

"I do not."

"You do!"

"Maybe a princess of the swans," Lydia snorted.

"Shut up, Lyddie!"

"No Kitty, I deserve it, all of it. I have been awful. You must allow me to apologize." She took her hands, "I am not a princess, I am not even the daughter of a gentleman. I have been rude, and condescending in the worst way. I am your inferior in every way."

"You may not be a gentleman's daughter, but what does that signify? You are stylish, and so strong. You are not afraid of anything or anyone, and you do what you want. I have watched you these past months at our little card parties and teas. You do not give a fig what others think of you. You are your own person. You even deflect the insults my sister throws your way."

"Only because most of the time I do not understand that I have

been insulted by her until it is far too late to say anything in return. You give me too much credit.”

“No. No, Miss Bingley. You have made me realize that I need to be more like you...to stand up for myself, and to be braver than I have been...to be assertive and strong.”

Caroline could no longer hold back the tears, and they streamed down her face. “Kitty, I would be pleased if you would call me Caroline. I would be honored to be counted amongst your friends. Even if I do not deserve it.”

The two reached out and exchanged a tight embrace.

“Oh spare me more tears and drama. For the love of all things holy, will one of you please call the apothecary? Can’t you see I need a plaster for my nose? I am bleeding everywhere and need something for the pain! What is wrong with you heartless people?”

Kitty and Caroline turned to face a bloody Wickham, arm in arm. “Mr. Wickham...do shut up.”

“You are all horrid awful!” Lydia stomped and grabbed for the gurgling lieutenant’s arm, “Someone must do something for poor, dear Wickham.”

“Do not worry about your formerly handsome officer, Miss Lydia. I know exactly what to do with him. Carter, stand him up would you? He has inconvenienced his hostess more than enough for one night, and I think he might be bleeding on the rug.”

Captain Carter lifted his whining captive none too softly.

“But Colonel Fitzwilliam, he is terribly injured. What will you do with him?”

“I will see to his care, personally, Miss Lydia, no need to fear. Captain Carter will protect him from any further serious damage... from me, at least. Before we go, I do feel that we all need a little talk, don’t you, Mr. Denny?”

Denny wavered in place beside Lydia Bennet, edging slightly behind her. “I don’t think that is necessary, that is...I mean to say, not you and me...specifically...”

“We can speak right here, officer to officer, with witnesses. Miss Lydia should join in our discussion too. We are all friends, are we not?”

“Now you want to talk to me?” Lydia whined with a pout, “you have all been trying to quiet me all night. Now I am important enough to consider?”

Colonel Fitzwilliam grinned at her. It was not a pleasant grin.

More of a snarl really. “Yes, I believe you are, in fact, very important...perhaps the most important person in the room.”

Lydia, for once, kept quiet as she folded her arms across her chest and stared with a calculating eye.

The room was silent.

“Well?” she huffed, “Mr. Chamberlayne will be horribly saddened if I do not appear for my the next set. He is to partner me, you know, and I will not miss a dance. My card is full.”

“I will not keep you. I will not keep either of you. But I must have your word...Mr. Denny?”

Denny started and swung his head around on his neck, “Yes, Colonel! If you would, ah, not mind repeating that? I seem to have...my mind was wandering, I’m afraid.”

The Colonel cleared his throat, “Let me be clear then. Tonight, in this library, you gathered to wish me joy. And I appreciate your support and friendship, as does Miss Bingley.”

A snort erupted from Lydia, “How rich! Miss Bingley — a friend of mine! You must be kidding.”

Colonel Fitzwilliam motioned for Kitty to stand down and returned the girl’s glare with a soft eye. “You have every reason to dislike Caroline Bingley, Miss Lydia. I know that you do. But do this for me. Do this because it is the right thing to do.”

Lydia looked down at her slipped foot, tracing a circle with her toe.

“And if those are not reason enough...do it to save the already dubious reputation of your friend, Mr. Wickham.”

Her head shot up and eyes traveled from Colonel Fitzwilliam to her sister, standing, arm linked with Caroline, and frowned deeply. “Those are all very good reasons. And you are truly a jolly friend, Colonel, and I do wish you well...although I worry a little for you that you have not recovered from some blow to the head during one of your campaigns. But she...she is perfectly horrible. Why would I ever want to protect the likes of her?”

“Lyddie! You have been just as bad. And you would not want someone to blacken your own reputation.”

“I was not the one *kissing* Wickham in the library, Kitty! But if she wants me to keep that to myself, then she is going to have persuade me herself!”

Lydia Bennet stood with heaving chest and dagger shooting eyes.

“Oh ho ho ho! This is getting good!”

“Mr. Denny! You are not helping matters. You will wait for me in the hall.”

“But sir, I would prefer to stay and...and...offer my support and arm to Miss Lydia.” Denny’s words ran together loose and sloppy like cream on porridge, but he remained doggedly resolute as he crooked out an arm. Lydia took it and pulled him in close, peaking an eyebrow at the others in challenge.

“Let him stay,” Caroline stepped forward and placed her hand on the Colonel’s arm. “Mr. Denny, I very much appreciate your support and your felicity upon hearing of my engagement to Colonel Fitzwilliam. I trust you are staying to act as escort to Miss Lydia whose escort, Mr. Wickham sadly tripped on a poorly tacked rug as he was congratulating us and fell flat on his face?”

Lydia rolled her eyes, and exhaled in disgust, and Mr. Denny bowed, “As you say, Miss Bingley. I offer you congratulations, sir on being excepted by such a *fine* lady, and to you Miss Bingley...may you find every happiness with the good Colonel. And I hope my friend makes a full recovery...in time...from his unfortunate fall.”

He finished and patted Lydia’s arm. She snatched it away, glared at him, and returned to her previous stance of hugging herself. “Well. I am waiting.”

She tapped her lip, “I cannot recall properly...it must be the punch...but did Mr. Wickham trip as he pushed away from your unwelcome attentions or did he trip as he enthusiastically offered his felicitations to you, Miss Bingley?”

Caroline breathed in sharply through her nose as the rest of the room waited in silence. She exhaled and pulled her shoulders back.

“The truth be told, Miss Lydia...” Her head dropped and she pushed all the air from her lungs like a bellows, “Mr. Wickham fell after I hit him in the face with that copy of Plato’s...Socratic...whatever.”

“The truth is that Mr. Wickham made to compromise me, Miss Lydia. He said he we would make a very modern couple. That we were equally grasping. That he would have preferred a titled lady, but that he—”

“No! He did not! He said no such thing. Wickham loves me. He thinks you are awful.”

Caroline shook her head, “He very well may think I am awful, but he said he could put up with a lot in exchange for my dowry.”

“Ooh! That is a fine thing to tell a lady in a dark library.”

Lydia elbowed Denny in the ribs, “You shut it, Denny! And you...you stop telling such horrid-awful lies. No one will believe you. Everyone knows that you would do anything to ruin my fun... that you hate me.”

Caroline pinched her nose, “This is not how I meant this to go... Miss Lydia, I have no designs on Mr. Wickham—”

“Good! Because I think that the Colonel deserves better than that.”

“You are correct. He deserves the world.” Her eyes found his, and his lips curved up slightly but he nodded his head in encouragement. “And I have given you no reason to support me, no reason to even believe me. But Miss Lydia, I implore you. I beg of you...”

She stepped towards Lydia and when she spoke, her voice was a whisper, “He is not who you think he is.”

Lydia rolled her eyes and opened her mouth to speak, but Caroline was faster. “You deserve better. You deserve the world, Miss Lydia.”

Surprise warred with confusion as Lydia’s browns moved in and up and together again.

Caroline raised her hand. “I am sorry for all I have done. For our many disagreements. For treating you with disdain. For mocking you. It was wrong of me to do so, so wrong...and I thoroughly regret my behavior towards you, since...since coming into Hertfordshire. I have been meaning to apologize to you. Truly. I just did not know how to begin.”

Caroline hung her head. The ormolu clock on the mantle ticked off the seconds.

“Oh stuff and rubbish.” Lydia spit into her hand and reached out for Caroline’s, who snatched hers back.

Lydia cocked a brow at her. “Do you want my promise or not?”

“She means for you to do the same, and seal the promise on your side,” Kitty whispered from over Caroline’s shoulder. “Do it.”

Caroline raised her hand and spit. Unlike Lydia’s forceful efforts, what little spittle Caroline managed, stubbornly clung to her lip, created a shimmering line from her palm.

Lydia smirked at her. “You are not very good at this.”

“You were much better,” Caroline severed the spit string with her free hand.

"I, Lydia Bennet, solemnly swear to tell no tales of Caroline Bingley in the library with Mr. Wickham."

Caroline offered her damp hand.

"Not so fast!" Lydia leaned back. "What do you offer in exchange?"

"In exchange?"

Lydia clicked her tongue and leaned to look around Caroline to Kitty, "And you said she was so accomplished and well-educated. She does not even know how to properly parlay."

"Parlay?"

"I believe Miss Lydia is saying you have to give something up to get something, Miss Bingley," Denny guffawed enthusiastically, "Like pirates would. You are much better at this Miss Lydia."

Lydia grinned at Denny before turning back to Caroline and offering a lolling sort of nod. "So?"

Caroline held her hand out crisply, "I, Caroline Bingley, solemnly swear to apologize publicly to Lydia Bennet before the night is through and offer her whatever form of compensation I possess to right my wrongs against her."

The room held its collective breath.

"Is there something more? Did I not do it correctly?"

"Oh you did it right...but I am not sure that I do want you to apologize to me after all. I mean, you have treated me poorly...but I believe there is one other who you have wronged even more."

"Please, Lydia, please just tell me what you want."

"I want you to apologize to my sister, Elizabeth! Would that not be the most diverting apology to watch of all times?" Lydia succumbed to a fit of giggles. "Well?"

Caroline grew still. And thoughtful.

"Well?" Lydia repeated, but her voice had lost any hint of humor. "Admit it, Caroline. You have been a royal pain to Elizabeth, to all the Bennets outside of Kitty. So just get on with it."

"You are right. My behavior has been lacking."

Caroline again puffed a bit of spit into her hand, with slightly greater success than the first time, and held it out to Lydia, "I, Caroline Bingley, solemnly swear to apologize publicly to Elizabeth Bennet before the night is through. I shall do everything in my powers to right my wrongs against her."

"That will do, Miss Bingley, that will do nicely." Lydia clapped her own spitty palm atop Caroline's and the two exchange a firm

handshake.

“Can I please go and dance now? You all are so deathly dull! Come on, Denny! Poor Chamberlayne will be devastated to miss partnering with me. I was supposed to dance the last with Wickham, but he has treated me beastly bad, so you will have to do for the final set.” She pulled the young soldier through the door without so much as a look back, noisy voice bouncing behind her, “The rest of you really should join us in the ballroom. It is powerfully ridiculous that none of us are dancing.”

Crafty Quadrille

"She is right. I cannot miss another dance. It will be noted if the hostess is not on hand to close the ball."

"If you give me but a moment, I am sure I can arrange these feathers to cover that little patch in your skirt. And your hair is good as new."

"I cannot thank you enough, Kitty."

"It is what friends do, Miss Bing—"

"Caroline."

"Caroline." Kitty smiled widely and nodded once.

As Kitty inspected, tucked, and fluffed, Caroline brushed her fingers along her damp lashes and smoothed her hair. Complete they turned to the door.

"If you please, Miss Bingley," the Colonel reached out and gently held her back as Kitty walked into the candlelit corridor. "It will be but a moment's work to secure Mr. Wickham, and I would very much like to dance the final set with my fiancé. Even if it means fending off the likes of Percy Lucas for the honor."

A smile stretched across Caroline's face.

"That is much better," The Colonel bestowed a kiss on the tip of her nose, "but you have not answered my question."

"I do not believe you asked a question, sir," she shot him a devastating smile.

"Will you marry me, Caroline?"

A deep laugh bubbled up and out, coloring her words with joy, "Yes, a thousand yesses, I will marry you, Richard."

"Richard is it? I do like the sound of my name on your lips. And will you dance with me, Caroline?"

"I would dance to the moon with you, Richard."

Caroline stood on her toes and brushed her lips across his. He tasted of brandy and apples and fall leaves.

"Oh goodie! Everyone is incandescently happy. Never mind my nose, or the blood that is dripping down the back of my throat. As long as you are getting married, and you have your dance, I will be perfectly well."

“George, old man! Are you still here?”

“Yes, *Richard, old man*, I am still here. Waiting for someone to take me to the surgeon and set my nose.”

“Oh, we will go, George, but not to the surgeon. But not to worry. I will personally set that nose in a thrice.”

The Colonel gently pushed Caroline out the door, and closed it slowly behind her, until all she could see was his half-face. “Off with you then, I’ll see you on the dance floor.” He winked and shut the door firmly.

* * *

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* * *

“Caroline! There you are.”

Her shoulders drew up to her ears, and she spun around, barely keeping the punch in the little cup she clutched in her hand. “Charles!”

“Yes, of course, who did you expect?”

Her brother beamed beside a girl with a generous smattering of dark freckles across her nose and cheeks. Covering her face, really. “Miss King,” Caroline nodded her head, “I hope you have been enjoying the festivities this evening. I do not believe we have had the chance to speak yet tonight. Let us fix that now, shall we?”

Both Charles and the spotted Mary King gaped. Miss King moved first. “Why I would love nothing more, Miss Bingley.”

Both ladies looked at Charles Bingley, expectantly. He stood staring mute, clearly at a loss.

Caroline forced the punch cup into his hand. "You do not mind freshening my cup when you fetch one for Miss King, do you Charles? And if you do not mind, I could do with just a splash of whatever it is you keep in the pocket of your waistcoat, brother. It has been such an exhausting night!"

Charles peered closely then shook his head, "As you wish, Caroline, as you wish. Miss King, I will be back in a instant. Caroline," he nodded slowly and was gone.

The girl looked at Caroline and tilted her head. Much like Lydia Bennet would.

"Well?"

"Well?"

"Well, he is gone. What is it you want, Miss Bingley, you never talk to me, or did you just want to be rid of your brother?" She narrowed her eyes, "What has happened to your head piece, Miss Bingley? What has happened to your lips?"

Miss King inhaled sharply and her little cupid lips parted in a halo. She hissed, "You have been kissing someone!"

Heat burned up Caroline's chest and neck, quickly lighting her cheeks aflame. "Shh! Miss King! Where is your sense of propriety?"

"My sense of propriety? Where is yours, Miss Bingley? Your lips look like you have been eating rose petals, and you ask me about propriety? Pshaw!"

She rolled her eyes and crossed her arms.

"I *have* been kissing someone, Miss King." It popped out, racing like a cork from a bottle of champagne. Caroline slapped her hands over her mouth.

"I knew it!" the girl squeaked.

Were these Meryton Misses all alike? And was that really such a bad thing? True, they were to a one, presumptuous and forward, but Caroline admitted to herself, they were enthusiastic and open, ready to make friends at hello. So different from the girls at school and the duplicitous demons lurking in London ballrooms.

Miss Bingley pulled Mary King to her side, "I feel awful discussing it before he, my betrothed that is, has a chance to talk to my brother...but I just have to tell someone, or I might burst!"

Miss King leaned closer.

"Colonel Fitzwilliam has asked me to marry him." As she said the words aloud, Caroline felt a dizzy warmth, a shameless, encompassing, rapturous, glowing warmth spread out from her

middle to her limbs. And she felt all of that happiness pour out to little, freckled Mary King beside her. "And I said yes. We are to be married, Miss King. I am overjoyed."

"No one ever asks me to marry him," Mary King sighed beside Caroline, "I wish you joy, Miss Bingley. I really do. Is he a good kisser? I think the Colonel looks like he would be a marvelous kisser. Did he get down on one knee? Was it perfectly romantic?"

"It was...it was...unexpected."

Miss King frowned.

"And perfectly romantic!" Caroline pitched her voice low, "I do not have another proper kiss to compare, Miss King, but I would wager that the Colonel is a most excellent kisser."

Mary King squealed. "Oh I knew it! What was it like?"

"What was it like?" Echos from so many conversations in so many ballrooms over the course of the last three years washed over Caroline. She was the one, the one with the juicy tidbit of information, the trusted advisor, the confiding confederate...and she wanted none of it. How surprising! As if of its own will, her fingers touched her lips, and she felt a heat blooming in those lips and in her belly. This was not an experience to share with anyone, if was hers and his, and she would guard it like a feral cat protects its kittens.

"What was it like," she murmured, watching Mary King's face awash in greedy enthusiasm. "It was everything a lady would wish for in a kiss, Miss King."

A flash of red appeared over Mary King's shoulder, a burnished queue of hair catching the light, as the Colonel, her Colonel, scanned the room. He turned and their eyes met, his look an effusion of joy and something less wholesome and infinitely more appealing.

Miss King kept talking, what she said, Caroline did not know and did not care, as Colonel Fitzwilliam now stood behind the girl, his considerable form filling her view. Her heart hopped about as if dancing a jig, almost painful and stealing away her breath. Speaking was out of the question, so she let him.

"Miss Bingley, Miss King," he bowed and stepped around the gaping girl, taking her arm and placing it atop his arm, firmly, possessively. Her skipping heart soared and she felt intoxicated, giddy, overwhelmed. She squeezed her lips between her teeth to hold in a torrent of wild laughter threatening to burst from deep

within.

“Colonel Fitzwilliam!” Mary King gushed and happily forgot all about Caroline with the appearance of her more interesting and terribly handsome fiancé. “I understand that congratulations are in order. How romantic you are too propose at a ball.”

Caroline watched his eyebrows shoot up, wide shoulders lean down, and mouth quirk in a grin, “I accept your congratulations with all the enthusiasm I possess, Miss King, and then some.”

He bowed over and then kissed her hand. The girl’s cheeks turned as scarlet as his coat and she beamed a sunny look strictly at the Colonel. Her eyelashes batted in the most dizzying manner.

Appearing to relish the moment, matching dimples popped in his own cheeks in response. Caroline jumped when her betrothed guffawed as he dropped Mary King’s hand in exchange for her own. “You are most kind to keep Miss Bingley company in my absence, Miss King, but if you will now be so understanding as to excuse us for a moment, I believe it is time that I ask for Mr. Bingley’s blessing, before my beloved shares our happy news with all of Hertfordshire.”

Miss King gave a knowing wink and grabbed for Caroline’s punch cup as the Colonel whisked her away at a rapid clip. And towards her brother. She was sure her smile was very stupid at best.

An Unsurprising Announcement

“Wait!” Caroline wheeled around, stopping the Colonel before he reached his target.

“Do you not wish to tell your brother our happy news and seek his blessing?”

“I...I...I just need a moment.”

“It has been a full evening,” the Colonel smiled down at her and brought her ever so closer to his side, “would you rather retire for the evening. I must confess I would not be perfectly content waiting until tomorrow to seek his approval for our match, but for you, I would do anything. You must know that.”

His gaze set her on fire with its intensity.

“No!”

The grin split his face.

“That’s the Caroline I know. Come my tiger. Let us make this official.”



* * *

Charles Bingley stood facing the musicians, his back to the room, an unintentional rudeness that would mortify him were he able to focus on anything other than the woman in front of him who faced the room. The very air around Charles seemed warmer and lighter, buoyed by his genuine if not infectious laughter. His audience consisted of his reason for all rudeness, Jane Bennet, flanked by Elizabeth Bennet, and Charlotte Lucas. Mr. Darcy and Mary Bennet skulked on the fringes, together in stern-mouthed separateness.

Even from across the dance floor, Jane Bennet’s glowing

admiration was obvious. She might just melt the candles in the chandelier above all of them. Jane and Charles appeared oblivious to anything but one another, but not Elizabeth Bennet. Her face shut down like a drawbridge — eyes tight and narrow, her pert lips pressed firmly together making her face more formidable than any portcullis.

Caroline also saw exactly when Miss Lucas noted it all. She reacted in the most refined and political of ways. She slyly squeezed Eliza's hand and flashed her a raised eyebrow and gentle smile, which diffused Miss Elizabeth's predatory air in a flash — a remarkable accomplishment.

Then Miss Lucas turned to the cow-eyed Charles, and caught his attention simply by looping her arm through Jane Bennet's and pulling her in close, while adopting a similar though less shining look of admiration. Charles did so enjoy being surrounded by ladies.

Mr. Darcy's look would have been the most interesting of all, had it not been for Mary Bennet's reaction. While Darcy's inscrutable displayed an extraordinary amount of emotion, chiefly shock and bewilderment, Mary Bennet looked as if she might crumple in upon herself, the veriest wilted wallflower.

Richard addressed that awkward couple first. "Darcy," he boomed and clapped his free hand upon his cousin's shoulder then bowed most gallantly over the wallflower's hand, giving her a much softer yet equally affectionate greeting, "and Miss Mary. I do hope you have enjoyed the rest of your evening, Miss Mary, and that my cousin Darcy has provided you with punch and entertainment aplenty, as is deserved by all charming young misses?"

He chucked Darcy's shoulder and shot a him a look that said he had better make up for standing beside the poor drooping girl without speaking a word to her. "Miss Mary, may I steal away your escort for a brief word if I promise to return him to you forthwith?"

Mary Bennet's head wheeled around from Colonel Fitzwilliam to Mr. Darcy and back again. The girl was all bewilderment. "But he is not my escort."

"We will be back in but a moment," Colonel Fitzwilliam shot a final grin her way as he dragged his cousin to a discreet spot near the musicians.

Caroline found herself left with Miss Mary and a case of supreme distraction as she watched her fiancé's conversation just out of

earshot. Mr. Darcy's eyebrows rose to the heavens then fell in a look remarkably similar to Miss Eliza's earlier fortified glare. He raised his hand and pointed at her, then as if realizing his blunder, ran his fingers through his hair disheveling it to no small degree.

"What are they arguing about?" Miss Mary craned her neck over Caroline's shoulder for a better view. "Colonel Fitzwilliam looks as cheerful and charming as ever, but Mr. Darcy...he looks like he might be sick. I mean, more than his normal nervous sick. More of an angry sick."

This remark, delivered so casually, captured Caroline's full attention. "What do you mean, *his normal nervous sick*, Miss Mary? Mr. Darcy is not sick."

"Well, no, not sick in the sick sense. Not like vomity sick."

The eye roll that came so naturally to Caroline just popped out, unbidden. This Mary Bennet was such a curious creature. "If not vomity sick, what kind of sick is there, Miss Mary?"

"The kind of sick that you feel when you someone asks you a question that you do not want to answer, like 'What do you think of the pudding?' when you find it repulsive. Or 'Do you prefer the puce ribbon or the lavender ribbon?' when you cannot for the life of you tell them apart or what difference it could possibly make to the bonnet in Lydia's hand. Or when a handsome man asks you to dance or a simple question like, 'How are you today, Mary?' and the nervous sickness makes the words stick in your throat until you think you might actually be the vomity kind of sick."

Mary held her fisted hands over her mouth as if cramming the words back in and whispered, "My kind of sick, Miss Bingley."

The girl fled out the door to the balcony leaving an open-mouthed Caroline standing alone. "Ah. That kind of sick. My kind of sick too, Miss Mary. But Mr. Darcy...who would have thought."

Caroline turned back to where the cousins stood close, nearly toe to toe, shifted to the side. Colonel Fitzwilliam was holding Darcy's upper arm, and Mr. Darcy's fingers fanned out over his mouth and chin, hiding any expression from anyone who might be watching. Like Caroline, for instance.

The Colonel's head nodded gently yes as Mr. Darcy's shook a decided no. Words continued to flow quickly from the Colonel. Mr. Darcy glanced at her once more and then back to the Colonel. They stopped speaking. Then, although she could not hear it, Caroline could not miss the single word uttered by her fiancé — please.

Darcy squeezed his eyes shut, and nodded once, his irreparably mussed hair, flopping into his eyes. He grabbed Colonel Fitzwilliam's arm, then the two embraced with hearty back slaps and broad smiles.

Caroline released the breath she was not aware she had been holding. "My kind of sick indeed."

A Surprising Announcement

Charles beamed another smile her way. An irrepressible, very Charles sort of smile that claimed permanent hold of his face from the moment he elatedly granted Colonel Fitzwilliam permission to take Caroline as his lawfully wedded wife. Nothing had made Charles happier in recent memory. He looked even happier than when he danced with his Jane Bennet. Less distracted perhaps, but even more impossibly joyful.

Bouncing on his toes, he greeted her by taking her hands and swinging her in a wild circle before pulling her into a hug. "Louisa!" Charles waved to their sister and shouted, deafening her left ear, but it hardly signified — Caroline was too full of joy to find anything even remotely annoying.

Louisa rushed to her brother with quick mincing steps and a look of alarm on her face, her hand absently held her lower abdomen. Caroline brought her hands to her mouth as her eyes went wide in realization.

"What is it Charles?" Louisa hissed in alarm as she completed the circle, bringing the trio closer to hide them from prying eyes. "Has something horrid occurred?"

"Horrid? Heavens no! Wherever would you get such an idea? Caroline has something exciting she wants to share with you."

"I do. I do! But I believe your news is equally exciting."

"You're engaged!"

"You're pregnant!"

Charles bounced on his toes, looking between the two sisters, eyes incredibly wide. Then an even wider grin split his face in two. "This is just stupendous...the best day ever! I shall have a new brother, and I shall be an uncle. An uncle!"

He drew both of the sisters into his arms and squeezed them tight. Such a demonstration could not go unnoticed in a ballroom, and within minutes heads were turned in their direction and an excited susurrant moved through the air in a wave washing over all the dancers and lookers on alike. Even the musicians took note.

Charles exchanged a happy glance with Jane Bennet before

grabbing a glass from a passing footman's tray and stepping up onto the dais beside a violin player.

"If I may have your attention...your attention please!"

The room turned its collective attention to Charles Bingley and as conversations faded away, he began, "I cannot thank you enough for joining us in celebration this evening. Even more, I would thank you for the kind welcome you have extended my family — the hospitality and openness with which you have received us is beyond expectation. We could not hope for better and more generous friends. If you would indulge me for but a moment more, I shall have the musicians begin again soon, but I have an announcement. Please join me in— Caroline hopped up beside her brother, cutting him off mid-sentence.

"In...in expressing my personal gratitude for..." She paused and looked out at a sea of eyes. Those eyes immediately lost the warmth that she had witnessed shining from them for her brother not minutes before. They now ranged from skeptically unfriendly to positively hostile. She turned her head to the side desperate for a warm glance from Colonel Fitzwilliam.

Instead of her affianced, she saw the sparkling eyes of the freckle-faced Mary King, who nodded to her encouragingly. Of course, Miss King assumed that Caroline planned to announce her own engagement. While this would be unconventional to say the least, it was far preferable to what she was about to do. She drew in a deep breath and returned Miss King's smile.

"I wanted to thank you for the many kindnesses you have shown me. You have called upon me here at Netherfield, invited me into your homes, showered me with compliments, and offered me the hand of friendship. And I...I have not been worthy of your goodness.

Caroline paused. Her nails biting into the palms of her hands stopped her eyes from watering. She looked up and made eye contact with Mrs. Bennet, "I have been worse than unfriendly. I have been cold. I have been judgmental. I have...I have said unkind things..."

Mrs. Bennet nodded her head, but did not relax the firm line that had somehow replaced her lips. That lady tilted her head as if to say, 'Continue.'

"Most of all, I stand before you to offer a sincere apology to one I have wronged." Caroline scanned the room, and found her target

close at hand, standing beside the very concerned Jane Bennet. "Miss Elizabeth Bennet, will you come forward? Will you please come forward."

Elizabeth handed her punch cup off to Jane, looking at her sister with confusion and something like alarm. Caroline could hardly blame her — she likely suspected that Caroline has something wretched planned, to single her out, bring shame upon her family.

Miss Elizabeth held her head high as she approached, then raised one eyebrow, her fine eyes blazing in question. Caroline scanned the room, and found Lydia watching from the punch bowl, cup in hand, leaning into Mr. Denny, an almost perfect simulacrum of her mother, except where Mrs. Bennet's lips disappeared in her fit of pique, Lydia's formed a pouting pucker of displeasure. She nodded to convey that she was ready for Caroline to honor her part of the bargain.

"Miss Elizabeth, if you would allow, I find I owe you an apology. I was wrong, completely and utterly wrong." Caroline looked up and addressed the room, "All of you have heard, if you were not actually present, of how I suggested that Miss Eliza was to be married to Mr. Collins, of how he kneeled before her, professing his admiration, and holding her hand to his heart...Well...I was wholly and unconditionally wrong. And I knew it from the start. He was only asking her for the first set at the ball tonight. Even if it did look like a proposal."

"Yes you were, Caroline Bingley!" Lydia Bennet's voice rang out over the swell of the crowd, silencing the room at once. "You are a cold fish of a young woman, and you have sullied my sister's good name, made her look like an ingrate, like a jilt, like a heartless—"

"Thank you, Lydia, we understand how this colors Elizabeth," Mr. Bennet called over his shoulder, shooting his youngest daughter a look so stern it actually made her stop. He then took his wife's arm and spoke into her ear.

"I will do no such thing! Let her apologize to me, Mr. Bennet! Now Mr. Collins says he may not have Elizabeth!" She wrapped him on the arm with her fan and crossed her arms like her youngest daughter, then the sobbing began.

"No, Mr. Bennet, please leave her be. Mrs. Bennet is right to rebuke me. What proper mother would not speak for her daughter? What has she said that is not true? I thought it was so funny, such a good joke," she caught Elizabeth's eye, "and I did risk Miss Eliza's

reputation. Most happily, and all because Miss Elizabeth is the one person bold enough to tell me exactly how I appear to others. She made me reflect upon my failings, which I really did not want to see. I wanted to pay her back for the favor.”

Murmurs of disapproval ran through the room.

Elizabeth stood tall, disdain written all over her expressive brown, a frown on her face. Her eyes shot fire.

“Miss Elizabeth, I do not expect you to accept it or easily forget my offense against you, as I would not if I were in your position.” Caroline felt as if she might collapse from the weight of her shame, “But I hope you feel that I have at least done you justice, and that you leave this house feeling vindicated and full of your distinct Elizabeth Bennet spirit. I am very sorry, Miss Elizabeth. I humbly beg your forgiveness.”

The silence pressed against Caroline, deflating what little vitality she had left. Elizabeth stared at the ground in front of her feet. Caroline turned to step past Charles, who stood to the side scrubbing a hand over his mouth.

“Miss Bingley, wait.”

Caroline wasn’t sure she had heard it. It was the quietest she had ever heard Eliza Bennet speak.

Elizabeth looked up, a small smile on her lips. “That was a very pretty apology. You are rather bold yourself, you know. I thank you for restoring my character. I suspect we will never be close, but I believe I will accept your apology. Being as it is the best one I have ever received.”

Caroline stepped down from the platform and moved to Elizabeth. As the two young women reached for and then stopped short of an embrace, settling on a handshake, the room erupted in a whoop of celebration.

The musicians blew a noisy fanfare.

Elizabeth positively glowed with an inscrutable look on her face. Caroline would never truly understand her. Then she leaned in close and whispered into Caroline’s ear.

“You did me a great service tonight, Caroline Bingley. As your rumor spread through the ballroom, Mr. Collins began to accept all of the words of congratulations while I refused to accept a kind word about him. I believe hearing me reject his suit within his hearing over fifty times, he finally realized that I was not the woman for him. He told me he would never offer for such an

ungrateful, headstrong girl, and departed the ball before the last set began. You effectively saved me a great deal of discomfort, as my mother would never have spoken to me had I actually rejected a proposal from the man.”

She then took Caroline’s hands and kissed her on either cheek. “I owe you a debt of gratitude, Miss Bingley.”

Elizabeth laughed first, then Caroline joined in, and everyone around felt lifted by the joyous sound. With the exception of Mrs. Bennet, perhaps.

Charles attempted to regain the attention of his guests.

Miss Jane Bennet bestowed the most beatific smile upon Caroline.

And a warm and confident hand on the small of Caroline’s back told her that Richard Fitzwilliam, Colonel in Service of His Majesty, Knight Companion, and stable boy, stood by her side.

She sagged against that comforting hand as she felt the heat of his breath near her ear.

“I am unbelievably proud of you. That was a positively magnificent apology.”

“If you move, I think I will fall to a heap on the ground.”

“Then I shall stand behind you, supporting you until the end of time.”

She felt his lips brush a small kiss on top of her head.

“Or until you have recovered yourself, whichever you prefer.”

“Supporting me until the end of time sounds marvelous.”

“As you wish, Shop Girl.”

The tears began to flow, streaming down her cheeks in front of everyone. And for once, she did not care. Not in the slightest.

An Unwanted Gift

The Bennet carriage jingled and rattled down the drive, and Darcy stood by Bingley's side, watching as the waning night enveloped the glow of white muslin and luminous silk just behind the small window.

Look back. Just one look...

He started, and swung his head around to make sure he had not said the words aloud. And there it was, a flash of pearl-studded locks, and a pair of fine eyes glanced through that window. Darcy stepped forward, as if drawn towards the departing conveyance, towards a most impertinent and possibly perfect girl...

He shook his head and turned in time to see his cousin escorting Miss Bingley over the threshold. He would be carrying her over a threshold soon enough. Richard. Always quick to act, but who would have thought he would be so impetuous in love?

Miss Bingley was no longer his problem. She was now Richard's problem. Forever more. His heart pinched sharply, and he brought a hand to his chest. What must that be like, to be so confident in one's choosing? To throw off the weight of societal and familial expectations and live just for one's own happiness?

Lord and Lady Matlock...now that would be a conversation. Thank God above that it would not occur tonight. The evening's turns had been exhausted.

The two friends made their way to the staircase as footmen appeared with tables, chairs, and settees, silently putting the house to right after an evening of many near-wrongs.

"I do not know about you, Darcy, but I am ready to sleep the sleep of the dead."

"Let us instead choose the sleep of the innocent," Darcy smiled at his friend. "You made a very credible announcement of your sister's engagement to my cousin. I am happy that our families will be united, and at so little inconvenience to myself."

"You know, Darcy, I did not see that coming. Not any of it...the engagement, the apology...the waltz." Bingley's blush was furious, even in the silvery light of the moon. "It was the most scandalous

ball I have ever attended, and I was the host! The good people of Meryton will think we are indecent and uncivilized.”

“Come now, Bingley. You may have been too captivated by your partner, but if you think about it, you will come to the same conclusion as I, and you shall go to sleep with a clear conscience.”

“I am too tired for thought. You must spell it out for me, Darcy.”

“Every savage can dance, even your Miss Bennet.”

“She is no savage. She is an angel.”

“Angel she may be, but she is an angel that can gracefully move through the steps of the waltz without missing a beat.”

Bingley’s jaw dropped. For at least the third time that night. “I had not even thought of that.”

Darcy grinned at his friend. “Besides, Richard asked the musicians to play the waltz to give the good people of Meryton something else to talk about over tomorrow’s tea. Your sister’s most public apology and precipitous engagement must now share space with that most charming Viennese import.”

“Fitzwilliam is deucedly quick thinking.”

“He is a brilliant tactician. I never bet against him.”

Darcy stopped in front of his door and held out his hand, which Bingley heartily shook.

“Now that I have liberated you from any lingering feelings of guilt, tell me honestly, Charles...did you thoroughly enjoy holding your savage angel so close?”

“It was extraordinary. The best dance of my life.” Bingley ducked his head and laughed low, “I rather like the thought of having a savage angel.”

Darcy rolled his eyes, “I must bid you goodnight before you say another word, or I shall not be able to look at Miss Bennet when next I see her.”

“But Darce,” Bingley screwed up his face in thought, “with whom did you dance the last?”

“Miss Mary Bennet. Who proved that behind that book of Fordyce beats the heart of a proper savage. She did not miss a step.”

Bingley laughed his way down the hall and kept laughing as he closed the door to his chambers.

Darcy smiled to himself as he loosened his cravat. “Mary Bennet, a savage angel, who would have guessed.”

Embers glowed low in the grate as Darcy removed his jacket and waist coat, boots and britches. He stretched and yawned, pulled

back the counterpane and blissfully, slid between the cool sheets.

And immediately bounced out of bed, scrambling backwards, hands frantically searching the nightstand for the candle.

A sickening, muffled squeal came from the bed, as he held the wick against the hot embers. Darcy held the candle aloft and nearly cried out at the obscenity before his eyes.

George Wickham raised his limbs from the bed, his hands bound and tied to his ankles, squirming on his back, face streaked with what looked to be dried blood caked to his face. Naked as the day he came into the world, save his feet, as he had been bound still wearing boots.

“Well, this is a sight I shall never unsee.” Darcy held the candle aloft and saw a bit of fabric sticking out of Wickham’s mouth. A never-ending length of muslin unfolded like Darcy was a some sort of conjurer and Wickham the most unfortunate apprentice.

“Water.”

Darcy carried the soiled muslin by his fingertips and deposited it in the far corner of the room, then poured a cup of water from a bedside carafe and held it to Wickham’s cracked and swollen lips.

Pink-tinged dribbled trailed across Wickham’s cheek and pooled on the pillow. Darcy winced at the not quite right angle of the man’s nose and the crusted blood circling each nostril. Another sip of water was offered and accepted, with more staining of the bed linens.

“Well?” Darcy exchanged the cup for the candle and brought the later close to his former childhood friend’s broken face. “How do you come to be in my quarters and whatever happened to your clothes and your face?”

Wickham swallowed hard, clearly audible in the quiet of the early morning. He rolled over and held his bound hands out, croaking, “For the love of simple human decency will you not untie me?”

Darcy stared for a good, long while, then furrowed his brow. “No, I do not believe I will. At least, not until you have told me your sorry story, and even then I cannot promise you that I will do so. Someone went through a great deal of trouble to truss you up like a plucked turkey and leave you in my bed. A vision so revolting that I may never achieve a full recovery.”

“You just stand there then, and revel in my pain and discomfort. Your father would roll over in his grave if he—”

“My father,” Darcy roared, “would have personally skinned you alive and laughed while you bled out after what you did to Georgiana! Perhaps I should do so myself.”

Wickham recoiled then stayed very still.

“I am tired, and you are in my bed. If you have any expectations of leaving this room before the sun rises, you had best start explaining yourself, and I warn you, I can smell a lie on you like a hound scents the fox.”

“It was Richard!”

“Richard?”

“Yes, Richard.”

“Richard broke your nose, stripped you down, tied you up, and left you like the worst gift of all time in my bed?”

“No, yes...not exactly.”

“You have five seconds to decide which it is.”

“No, he did not break my nose, he personally did not leave me here, but he ordered it done.”

“And who is the poor man taking orders from Richard?”

“Captain Carter.”

“Your Captain? And did he break your nose and bloody your face.”

“No.” Wickham fell silent.

“Who broke your nose, George?”

“Caroline Bingley.” The name spurted from his mouth in a sulky spit of words.

“Skinny Caroline Bingley broke your nose? Surely she didn’t punch you. Her comments are cutting to be sure, but I had no idea how powerful an insult can be,” Darcy chuckled.

“Ha ha. She hit me with a book. A really thick book. Broke my face. I called for a physician, but Richard just laughed. No one would come to my aid. Not even Lydia.”

“Miss Lydia Bennet. I am sure you do not have leave to use her given name.”

“I am sure I have leave to do much more than that. But since you are such a stickler for gentlemanly manners, Miss Lydia it is.”

“What did you do, George, to cause Miss Bingley to slam a book into your face? Reading instead of dancing again?”

Wickham turned his face away, inhaling sharply with the movement. Darcy replaced the stub of a candle on the table and moved to the window, pulling back the drapes. Indigo clouds

streaked the cold night sky.

“Do you see that, Wickham? If you were to leave now, you might have time yet to sneak into the encampment and hide yourself under your thin blankets. I will cut those binds when you finish your woeful tale.”

“Do you promise?”

“I already know how this ends — a hasty engagement and you soiling my sheets, so yes, I promise. I just want to know how we all got here.”

“Fine. Caroline Bingley, while a curve-less shrew, comes with a handsome dowry to offset her handsome wardrobe. I made a play. She hit me with a book. End of story.”

“You did not *make a play*, you tried for another compromise, you predatory, whey-faced lout.” Darcy kicked the mattress, “Look at me. Look! I am done playing. Quick now, what of Richard’s involvement?”

“Richard ran in like a knight on a charger, like he always does, all chivalrous concern and tender sentiments. I claimed compromise. Miss Bingley said she would rather be exiled to Ireland. Little idiot. Can I please have more water? I am drying up here.”

Darcy rolled his eyes and roughly yanked at Wickham’s bindings until he was loosened, then placed the cup in that man’s hand. “I will not play nurse-maid to the likes of you. Finish.”

Wickham drank the cup dry and massages his wrists. “The good colonel offered for her himself. Used all sorts of patently awful military analogies to declare his admiration for her. I cannot believe she accepted his offer. It was literally the worst proposal I have ever heard. He did not once mention her beauty or proclaim his life would be over without her.”

“What did he say?”

“That she was the most exciting, called her a sharp cannonball or some nonsense. And she ate it up, can you believe it? He talked about strategy and swords, and she fell right into his arms. I had to listen to them kissing and cooing for what felt like an eternity while in agonizing pain, choking on my own blood like a discarded animal.”

“I would never discard an animal, but I find I quite content to get rid of you. Up.” Darcy motioned for Wickham to stand.

“You may use the cloth that was in your mouth to wash the

blood from your face with the water in that basin. Then you will leave.”

George Wickham stumbled to the basin, then retrieved the cloth and stumbled back. He moaned and grimaced as he tended to his wounded face. Darcy retrieved a handkerchief and held it out at length when Wickham’s nose began to bleed again.

“Thanks, old man. How about that physician to set my nose?”

Darcy’s mouth dropped in disbelief, “How about you start walking now that you have tended to yourself.”

“Surely you jest.”

“You have often remarked that my humor is lacking.”

“But I have no clothes.”

“I will have them laundered and sent to you after I speak with Richard. After I enjoy a long sleep.”

“But I will freeze to death!” Wickham spluttered.

“I don’t care, George. No one bit.”

“But someone will see me!”

Darcy shrugged, “You have never been one for modesty. Why start now? Richard was kind it enough to leave your boots ”

“But if I do not see a physician soon, my nose will be forever crooked.”

“A reflection of your bent and twisted soul.”

“I am in pain.”

“I am unmoved. You should be in pain. It sounds as though you earned it, and frankly, I believe it suits you.”

Darcy opened the door and gestured Wickham through. He watched as Wickham hurried his way silently down the hallway, closed the door quietly, and then laughed as he had not laughed in quite some time.

Part V

Epilogue - Three Weddings and a Funeral